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THE CLOSEST ENCOUNTER

PASCAGOULA, MISSISSIPPI, 1973:
REOPENING THE FILES
ON A CLASSIC ALIEN
CONTACT CASE

**MARSUPIAL
ATTACKS!**

THE GREAT BRITISH BANDICOOT
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THE MEDIAEVAL MYSTERY OF THE
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STRANGE DAYS

A digest of the worldwide weird, including: Folklore survey, penis problems, wild weather, animals gone bad and more...

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THE CLOSEST ENCOUNTER: THE PASCAGOULA ABDUCTION

PHILIP MANTLE has spent years researching the 1973 alien encounter reported by Charles Hickson and Calvin Parker and argues that it remains one of the strongest UFO contact cases on record. Here, he reopens the Pascagoula files and presents his latest findings.

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Over the years, the tale of two strange children with green skins and speaking an unknown language appearing in a Suffolk village has attracted the attentions of historians, folklorists and forteans – but is this mediæval mystery any closer to being solved? **JOHN CLARK**, author of a major new book on the subject, offers an overview – and another potential explanation...

44 MARSUPIAL ATTACKS!

Back in 1996 Britain was reportedly facing invasion by an Australian marsupial with a large snout and a reputation for destroying crops – but the whole thing was a PR stunt for a new PlayStation game. **DR MIKE BENBOUGH-JACKSON** provides a brief history of the great bandicoot scare.

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ETIENNE GILFILLAN
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AND LUCAS BARDO

PASCAGOULA ALIEN FIGURES:
SEBASTIAN WOSZCZYK

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EDITORIAL



CAPUCINE DESLOUIS

ENCOUNTERS

In this issue we revisit one of ufology's classic close encounter cases – the 1973 Pascagoula incident in which two Mississippi shipyard workers, Charles Hickson and Calvin Parker, had a run-in with strikingly bizarre aliens that prefigured much of the abduction lore of the following decades. Philip Mantle, who has spent years digging into the incident, talking to the witnesses and finding suggestive new nuggets of evidence, believes that it remains “the best documented close encounter case on record”, and here offers a fresh look at Pascagoula and the latest developments in his investigation. When our own Jenny Randles met Charles Hickson she was struck by his calmness and willingness to talk: “We should err on the side of caution in assessing what witnesses say happens during such an abduction, but I have met too many honest witnesses like [this] and know they have had a genuine experience of some kind,” she wrote (FT438:29).

One controversial method of getting to grips with such an experience has been hypnotic regression; it was used in the Pascagoula case and the PC Alan Godfrey abduction of 1980, as Jenny recalls in her column this issue (p.29), adding that she was left “wondering where memory ended and imagination perceived as reality began.” Andy Owens has unearthed another, less well remembered British abduction case and in this issue has worked with the hypnotherapist who regressed the key witness, Rachel Devereaux, to present a full account of the process (p.50). Whether regression can be, at best, a useful therapeutic tool or, at worst, an invitation to fantasy, may depend on your point of view and personal experience; it can certainly reveal fascinating and possibly significant patterns of strangeness, but we should always be cautious about mistaking such patterns as literal facts.

UPCOMING EVENTS

A reminder that this year's Weird Weekend North, now a fixture in the fortan calendar, will be taking place over the weekend of 5-6 April at Rixton-with-Glazebrook Community Hall near Warrington, Cheshire. There will be the usual excellent line-up of speakers, including FT's news editor, Ian Simmons, giving his talk on ‘50 Years of Fortean Times’, Rob Gandy investigating ‘The



Ghosts of Goblin Hill’, Neil Nixon digging deeper into ‘Elvis Strangeness’ and Richard Freeman going ‘On the Track of the Caspian Tiger’. Other topics include Manchester's canal monsters, the Waverley Abbey Dragons and the Wollaton Gnomes. Something for everyone, then, and you can find

further info and buy tickets at: <https://www.weirdweekendnorth.com/>

Also of interest to fortians will be an exhibition coming to Moyse's Hall Museum in Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk, this Spring. “Superstition: Strange Wonders and Curiosities” will explore folklore, witchcraft and beliefs through artefacts from the museum's collection and beyond. Expect Black Shuck, a recently deciphered ‘witch's scroll’ found up a chimney and a whole lot more East Anglian weirdness. The exhibition runs from 15 Feb to 6 April, and further information can be found at <https://www.moyseshall.org/whats-on/>

ERRATA

FT449:25

Ruth Summersides noted that our Necrolog entry on Tony ‘Doc’ Shields states that he died at the age of 84 being born in 1938. “However, at the end his dates are given as ‘born Salford 25 May 1938; died County Kerry, Ireland, 11 July 1924, aged 84’. Tony ‘Doc’ Shields Magician to the End?” Mark Wolstenholme also spotted the mistake, adding: “I'm sure that Doc Shields would have been delighted with one final Fortean flourish – he apparently managed to die nearly 14 years before he was born.”

FT449:59

Geoff Clifton spotted a typo in Barry Baldwin's review of *The Missing Thread*, by Daisy Dunn, which mentions the “Siege of Persia”; this was actually a reference to the Siege of Perusia in 40-41 BC. Brian McTaggart noted another error in the same review: “Enheduanna was not from the 3rd-century BC but from 3rd millennium BC; only a couple of thousand years off. The always informative and entertaining Mr Barry Baldwin might be refreshed by a trip out of the classical period every now and then – or was this an editorial faux-pas? [No.] Given Enheduanna is thought of as the first named author in history that would be a particularly egregious editor's error.”

COMPETITION



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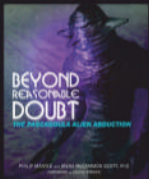


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BEYOND REASONABLE DOUBT

THE PASCAGOULA ALIEN ABDUCTION

PHILIP MANTLE & IRENA McCAMMON SCOTT



On 11 October 1973, two Mississippi shipyard workers decided to go fishing on the Pascagoula River after work – a decision that changed their lives forever. Charles Hickson and Calvin Parker watched as a dazzling light appeared, a strange object descended and three bizarre looking humanoid entities emerged and glided towards them... The Pascagoula abduction remains one of the strangest and best documented on record, and this book – containing new discoveries, exclusive interviews with Calvin Parker and eyewitness testimony from independent sources – is the definitive account of the case.

PASCAGOULA UNCOVERED WITNESSES, FILES & AUDIOTAPES

PHILIP MANTLE, WITH A FOREWORD BY
IRENA McCAMMON SCOTT



This book continues where *Beyond Reasonable Doubt* left off, documenting more information about the case and presenting more first-hand eyewitnesses. These witnesses have either stepped forward of their own accord or have been located by the author. One of them is Maria Blair, who believes that along with her husband she witnessed the abduction of Hickson and Parker from the other side of the Pascagoula River that night in 1973 – and the Blairs went on the record to state that they too had an encounter. A full interview with Maria Blair is published here for the first time. This book also features the various recordings located in the 'lost' APRO files.

PASCAGOULA 1973: THE HYPNOSIS TRANSCRIPTS

PHILIP MANTLE



Just days after their encounter, Charles Hickson and Calvin Parker met UFO researchers Dr James Harder and Dr J Allen Hynek, both of whom stated that they believed Hickson and Parker. Dr Harder conducted regressive hypnosis on both witnesses. Parker's hypnosis was quickly terminated as he was still in shock, but Hickson's hypnosis seemed to be successful. The idea of this book is to look at the use of regressive hypnosis in such cases and compare the conscious testimony with the data revealed under hypnosis. You can then make up your own mind on whether or not regressive hypnosis should be used in research into UFO close encounter cases.



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A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

STRANGE DAYS

EGG UFO DOESN'T HATCH | UAP whistleblower offers an intriguing tale, but no evidence



LEFT: Jake Barber claims to have been involved with both official and unofficial covert Government programmes concerned with retrieving downed aerial craft. BELOW: It turns out he's also a Jiu-Jitsu black belt and instructor.

The first few days of the second Trump presidency have seen him excite generations of conspiracy buffs by signing executive orders mandating the release of all remaining documents relating to the Kennedy and Martin Luther King assassinations. They have, though, disappointed believers in the "Disclosure" paradigm currently dominant in US ufology, as Trump has not, at the time of writing, made any move to reveal information about Government involvement with aliens, which they were certain would happen. Not that this has stemmed the tide of alleged revelations from elsewhere.

Yet another former military insider claiming to be a whistleblower has stepped forward with his own tale. This is Jake Barber, 48, who self-identifies as a 30-year veteran of official and unofficial covert Government programmes, particularly ones working with alien spacecraft, in a deeply secret team named

"Things come in and out of sight. Things disappear for a moment and reappear"

"Skywatcher". He does have a verifiable record as a military aerospace mechanic with experience in the US Air Force's Elite Combat Control special forces, which would have entitled him to a NATO top-secret security clearance. While this is the sort of profile that is consistent with a person who might reasonably

be deployed to deal with UFO/UAP crash retrievals, there is no independent evidence for his claim that "Skywatcher" or anything like it exists.

Barber asserts that after 9/11 he was set up as an independent contractor as a cover for his involvement in retrievals, working at an undisclosed facility in the US desert. "A lot of the work we did was on what I call 'the range,' where the US Government and its private partners used to test all kinds of things — weapon systems and resilience to weapon systems of certain craft — and so you see a lot of exciting things!" he said, adding "It's always interesting out there. Things come in and out of sight. Things disappear for a moment and reappear. Things seem to move very quickly. Things change colour. They change shape." Barber claims his team recovered "things that were exotic in nature," adding, "We know they were classified craft. And we recovered them and took them back to where they go."

While all of the above could apply to conventional, if possibly classified, aircraft, Barber also claimed to have come into contact with a "not human" object soon after joining the team. "I saw an egg, a white egg. There was no engine. There was no thermal signature. I was operating at night when I finally came in to pick it up. So, I'm working under





THE LIVING DEAD

Meet the man who faked his own funeral

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RODENTS OF TERROR

California's killer squirrels caught on film

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CRINOLINE CARNAGE

The tragic death of Phyllis Newcombe

PAGE 24

night vision goggles at the time, and it was quite clear. I flipped them up, flipped them down and looked at it a couple of different ways." The object was "metallic, pearly white" and about the size of an SUV. "I was a helicopter pilot, and I operate with a 150-to-200ft- (46-60m) long line. So, I got within 150 feet of this object," he said.

While Barber also described encountering a second type of object, which he termed an "eightgon" (presumably he meant "octagon"), with which he claimed to have some kind of psychic/spiritual experience, it is the "Egg" that came with alleged supporting evidence. This is in the form of a short video clip from an undisclosed source found by NewsNation to go with their interview with Barber. The clip shows something egg-shaped in a cradle dangling from some kind of tether. It is entirely shot in green, suggesting it was filmed using night vision tech, and shows the object being lowered onto a featureless rough surface that could be grass or desert, or possibly concrete. It is difficult to tell, as there is no indication of scale at any point and everything is green. It is also impossible to tell whether it is actually being carried by a helicopter as nothing apart from the tether cable and cradle is visible. As for the object, it is definitely featureless and egg-shaped, but there is nothing about it that indicates it is any kind of alien technology. Given the lack of scale or other visual clues, it could actually be an egg, and the "cradle" does resemble a bit of gaffer tape. We only have Barber and NewsNation's word that it is a retrieved UAP or that the video even relates to Barber's activities.

Lacking proper context, or any significant detail, this is a distinct let-down; once again, we have extraordinary claims supported by underwhelming



ABOVE: The video clip aired by NewsNation to accompany their interview with Barber shows an egg-shaped object in a cradle dangling from some sort of tether, but the green night vision and lack of any visual clues to provide a sense of scale make it hard to know just what we're looking at.

evidence. The current trend for featureless white "tic-tac" UAPs makes evaluating visual evidence much harder than when UFOs were supposed to be nuts-and-bolts saucers. You could literally have the best close up photo of a "tic-tac" UAP and not be able to say for sure if it was of alien origin. Their featureless nature makes fakery easy and real objects extraordinarily hard to verify, without the objects themselves being publicly available for independent scrutiny.

In his NewsNation interview, Barber went on to describe suffering long term health problems resulting from contact with UAPs. He also claims to have witnessed a "psychic dogfight" between two alien craft, and to be involved in attempts to combat

the recent US East Coast drone incursions (FT454:14-15, 26-27). His allegations, though, go no further towards demonstrating the existence of Government UAP programmes than any previous "whistleblowers", whose claims seem indistinguishable from grifts until such time as strong, objective corroborating evidence to back their assertions is made public. It is notable, though, that none of these self-proclaimed UAP "whistleblowers" have so far suffered any of the penalties visited on those from other, more conventional areas of US Government activity, such as Chelsea Manning, Reality Winner or Edward Snowden. newsnationnow.com, 19 Jan; express.co.uk, huffpost.com, 20 Jan 2025.

EXTRA! EXTRA!



FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

"I DIED AND WENT TO HEAVEN... IT SMELLS OF FRIED CHICKEN"

D.Star, 21 Sept 2024.

Black bear hit and killed while trying to eat pancakes in Tennessee

Sky News, 5 Oct 2024

MAN STRANGLED UNCONSCIOUS IN CARROT BATON MACHINE

BBC News, 15 Nov 2023.

The gangster brought down by a shipment of bananas

BBC News, 2 Oct 2024.

VILLAGER, 63, SAYS HE IS GETTING TOO OLD TO BE CRUCIFIED FOR THE 35TH TIME

Independent, 29 Mar 2024.



SIDELINES

BAR-BARIANS

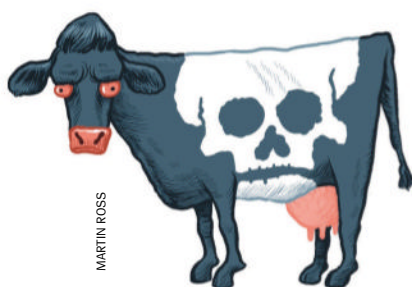
Archaeologists in Bulgaria were initially baffled by a splendid Roman-era sarcophagus which turned up on a Black Sea beach. Made of local limestone, it was dated to the 2nd or 3rd century AD by its elaborate relief decorations, but experts were confused as to how it came to be on the beach. The lid gave some clues, being modern and having several niches cut into it; further investigation revealed that the relic had not been washed up from a shipwreck or emerged from a tomb, but had come from a local bar, where it had been used as a table for many years. *euronews.com*, 12 Aug 2024.

EGGY POP

While having a drink in a pub, Ed Pownall, from Lambourn, Berkshire, spotted a perfectly spherical chicken egg for sale on the website of auctioneers Thomson Roddick Callan and decided to bid for it. "I had a glass in the local and thought I'd pop in a bid," he said. Pownall bid £150 and won the egg, which had been found in a box from a supermarket in Ayr, Scotland, and is apparently one in a billion. He said, "It's quite fun... I think for a £150 it's been money well spent," but admitted he was not quite sure what to do with it now. *BBC News*, 17 Aug 2024.

BRITAIN'S BIGGEST KILLER

According to the Office of National Statistics, cows are Britain's deadliest animals, carrying out 3,000 attacks every year. With each cow weighing up to 100 stone (635kg) and capable of running at speeds of up to 25mph (40km/h), and herds tending to act together, in the last four years they have killed 22 people. In the same period, dogs have killed 16, while 20 people have died of wasp or bee stings. *Sun*, 16 Sept 2024.



MARTIN ROSS

WILD TALES | More surprising stories from the animal kingdom, from orca salmon hats to Thai monkey riots

TOP DOG

While taking part in the flight of a lifetime over the Pyramids of Giza in Egypt, American paraglider Marshall Mosher was not expecting the view he got of the second tallest of them, the 448ft (136m) Pyramid of Khafre. "We noticed something running back and forth on top of the pyramid," said Mosher. "One person thought it was a mountain lion." It was not a mountain lion, which are not native to Egypt, but was a stray dog, chasing birds. Mosher was initially concerned for the animal, saying that he thought "he was stuck up there", but then realised "If he got himself up, he can get himself down unless he found some secret portal that helped him teleport to the top of the pyramids." And indeed a fellow visitor later videoed what looked like the same dog making its way down the monument. Once the image went viral on social media people started making connections with the Jackal-headed Egyptian death god Anubis, but Mosher said "I can see why the dog wanted to go up there. It's definitely the best view for a Cairo street dog that I can think exists." *editions.cnn.com*, 19 Oct 2024.



MARSHALL MOSHER



service, despite there still being 16 hamsters unaccounted for. *nypost.com*, 18 Nov 2024.

MONKEY RIOT

The town of Lopburi in central Thailand has become notorious for its gangs of aggressive monkeys. This reached crisis point during the Covid lockdown when they stopped getting food offerings from tourists at the local temples and took to ransacking local neighbourhoods. Authorities have never quite managed to reassert control over the unruly primates since then, despite their best efforts, and they continue to cause trouble. One measure to try and control them has been the construction of special enclosures to contain the monkeys, but in November 200 of them broke out and ran

riots through Lopburi. Attracting particular ire was the police station, which was besieged by the violent primates. "We've had to make sure doors and windows are closed to prevent them from entering the building for food," police captain Somchai Seedee said, expressing his concern that the monkeys might destroy important police documents if they got in. Traffic police and officers on guard duty were recalled to the station to try and fight off the intruders, but after several days a hard core of about a dozen monkeys remained defiantly perched on the station roof. In the streets, police and local authorities worked to contain the escapees, luring them back into detention with food, which was proving successful. *rte.ie*, 18 Nov 2024.

SALMON HATS ON TREND

In 1987, Orcas in the Puget Sound area near Seattle in Washington State took to wearing dead salmon on their



ASSOCIATED PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



LEFT: A worker in Lopburi beset by unruly monkeys. **BELOW:** An oarfish washed up on Grandview Beach in Encinitas, California, in Nov 2024.

heads. The trend started with one female in a group known as K-Pod and over the next five or six weeks the fashion spread so that in the end most of the Orcas from K-Pod and two other local pods were sporting salmon hats. Then, just as quickly, they ditched them, and salmon hats were as unfashionable as mullets on humans for the next 37 years. However, just like mullets, in 2024 salmon hats made a return to the catwalk, sported by J-Pod in Puget Sound. No one is sure why the whales do this, but cetologist Jared Towers says “Killer whales do have fads that come and go, and they’re often most prevalent among certain sex and age classes in the population. Then, over time, they tend to disappear.” It is thought likely that this year’s trend could have been initiated by older whales who remembered it from the 1980s. *New Scientist*, though, has suggested that the

Over the next five years the salmon hat fashion spread

orcas are just using their heads as storage space, saving excess salmon, caught when the fish are abundant, to eat later. *Ifscience.com*, 27 Nov 2024.

OARFISH OMENS

Between August and November 2024, three rare oarfish were washed up dead on the California coastline. All were around eight to 10 feet (2.4 to 3m) long. The fish, which have long ribbon-like bodies, dwell in the ocean deeps where light does not penetrate, and do not usually come to the surface. When they do, it is believed that their sinuous form may be behind some sea monster

sightings. In recent years, oarfish have come to be viewed as harbingers of doom, with surface sightings being seen as predictors of natural disasters like earthquakes, particularly undersea ones; their reputation as fish of ill omen started after 20 oarfish washed up on beaches in Japan in the months leading up to the 2011 earthquake. Oarfish have only been found on Californian beaches 20 times since 1901 and last year’s initial sighting off San Diego was linked to a small 4.4 magnitude earthquake on Monday 12 August near Los Angeles. However, this was not a deep sea quake; it was land based, and San Diego was about 125 miles (200km) away, so there is not likely to be any correlation between the events. Attempts were also made to tie the later sightings to a large offshore earthquake about 62 miles (98km) west of Ferndale, California, that caused a tsunami alert on 5 December 2024, but again, there is no obvious correlation, and the quake did not result in a tsunami. Ben Frable, a fish expert with the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, said that changes in ocean conditions and increased numbers of oarfish were more likely to be behind the sightings rather than earthquakes. *theguardian.com*, 15 Nov 2024.



ALISON LAFERRIERE / SCRIPPS INSTITUTION OF OCEANOGRAPHY

SIDELINES

BOOK THIEF

A 38-year-old burglar in Rome was caught after he broke into a flat in the Prati district and was confronted by the 71-year-old owner, who found the man absorbed in a book about Homer’s Iliad that he had picked up from a bedside table. The thief fled but was captured shortly afterwards with a bag of luxury clothing stolen from another flat. Giovanni Nucci, the author of the book *The Gods at Six O’Clock*, said: “I’d like to find the person caught red-handed and give him the book, because he’ll have been arrested halfway through reading it. I’d like him to be able to finish it.” *BBC News*, 24 Aug 2024.

BREAST IS BEAST

Mujar, a 19-year-old orangutan in Dublin Zoo, has not proved a very good mother, failing to bond with two infants, who died shortly after birth as a result. Orangs will often imitate human behaviour, so, when she produced a third infant earlier this year, the zoo recruited 30 human volunteers to take it in turns to breastfeed their babies in front of Mujar to encourage her to do the same. She watched, and tried to mirror their actions, but ultimately the zoo needed to bottle feed the infant to ensure its survival. *D.Telegraph*, 14 Aug 2024.

FORGETFUL

Staff at the Bambi Baby maternity superstore in Middletown, New Jersey, alerted police after CCTV cameras picked up three women making off with a baby stroller without paying. They were easily able to detain two of the women, 23-year-old Maryann Cash and 20-year-old Nan McCarthy, both British, because they returned to the store several minutes later to retrieve the baby they had left behind in their hurry to escape. Police were seeking their accomplice. *S.Mirror*, 1 Sept 2019.

CANNED HEAT

Six people were injured and a food truck destroyed in an explosion at the Kansas State Fair in Hutchinson. Investigators examining the scene discovered that the explosion had been caused by a canned food item becoming overheated and bursting violently because it had been stored too close to a food warmer. *D.Mirror*, 14, Sept 2024.



SIDELINES...

UNLIKELY ALIEN

According to his former aide Sir Peter Horsley, Prince Phillip was invited to meet an alien named Mr Janus in a flat in Smith Street, Chelsea, in 1954, to receive a message about saving the world. The Prince turned down the meeting, allegedly suspecting that the "alien" was a Russian spy, but Horsley claimed the alien "had an ethereal other-worldly quality, and it could read his mind and extract information about flying saucers" and remained convinced he'd met an extraterrestrial. *Metro.co.uk, 12 Sept 2024*

DODGING A BULLET

Police responding to reports of a shooting in Commerce City, Colorado, found that the victim had escaped with just a small puncture wound even though he had been shot at almost point-blank range with a .22 pistol. The bullet had lodged in the man's "silver" chain, leaving him with just a minor wound instead of potentially killing him. "We'd say he really dodged a bullet – but in reality, he LODGED a bullet", said a police spokesperson. They also said that if the chain was real silver, it wouldn't have stopped the bullet, adding "So maybe think twice before you knock a knockoff." *wfsb.com, 2 Jun 2024.*

CIRCULAR STREAMING

Musician Michael Smith, 52, was convicted of defrauding streaming services of royalties by using AI to create music for thousands of fake bands with names like "Callous Post", "Calvinistic Dust" and "Zygotic Washstands". Smith then put the music up on streaming services where he used bots to "listen" to it billions of times, earning himself \$10 million in royalties. *NY Times Int. Ed., 7 Sept 2024.*



MARTIN ROSS

GREATLY EXAGGERATED | Fake funerals and medical mix-ups



ABOVE: David Baerten staged his own funeral before arriving by helicopter and comforting mourners. **BELOW LEFT:** Baerten wanted to teach his family a lesson about staying in touch. **BELOW RIGHT:** Tyler Chase: surprised to be dead.

● The funeral of Belgian TikToker David Baerten, 45, was thrown into disarray when Baerten himself arrived in a helicopter with a film crew in tow. Baerten had faked his own death, with his wife being the only family member aware of the subterfuge, because, he said, he wanted to teach his family a lesson and make a point about keeping in touch. Baerten said he felt "unappreciated" by his relatives because he never got invited to family barbecues and other gatherings and wanted to show them that "you shouldn't wait until someone is dead to meet up". He had even kept his own children in the dark for the first couple of days, resulting in his daughter posting a message on Facebook, saying: "Rest in peace, Daddy. I will never stop thinking about you. Why is life so unfair? Why you? You were going to be a grandfather, and you still had your whole life ahead of you. I love you! We love you! We will never forget you."

He only let his children in on the secret when his film crew insisted he told them. He also admitted writing the emotional dedication published before his memorial service. What his relatives felt about this macabre charade is not recorded, but Baerten said: "As soon as I started

"You shouldn't wait until someone is dead to meet up"

receiving messages from people and videos of them crying, I wished I could cancel the whole thing, but it was too late. I asked myself, 'Why have you done this?' but it was too late. I'm sorry to all the people I hurt – I hate hurting people." It is not clear whether he will be invited to more family events in the future. *indy100.com, 14 Jun 2023.*

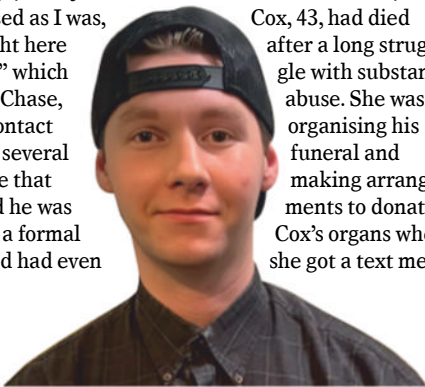
● Tyler Chase, 23, from Portland, Oregon, was taking part in a recovery programme after several months on the streets struggling with substance abuse when in October 2023 he discovered that his food assistance benefits had been stopped. Visiting the Department of Human Services to find out why, Chase says, "They were like, 'Can we see your ID?' So, I gave it to them." Once he handed it over, though, "They just looked as confused as I was, and they're like, 'Right here it says you are dead,'" which came as a surprise. Chase, who had not had contact with his family for several years, was unaware that they had been told he was dead, had received a formal death certificate and had even

been given an urn of ashes they believed to be his.

Investigating the error, county officials found that a man carrying Chase's wallet had been found dead from an overdose in Portland on 11 September 2023, with the only form of ID on him being the temporary driving license it contained. "So, they find a paper ID of me that's smudged and everything and they were like 'that's Tyler John Chase,' so they put him down as me," Chase said. "And then they notified the family like protocol."

The medical examiner's office that had decided the dead man was Chase and issued the death certificate admitted their error, saying, "We deeply regret that the misidentification happened," adding that "Going forward, all individuals who are found with a temporary state-issued identification must also have fingerprints submitted for positive identification, to ensure that this will never happen again." *wcax.com, 10 Jan 2024.*

● Heather Insley from Ottawa in Canada had also been led to believe that her son, Sean Cox, 43, had died after a long struggle with substance abuse. She was organising his funeral and making arrangements to donate Cox's organs when she got a text mes-





ABOVE: Heather Insley and her husband Bill at the hospital bed of the dying man they believed was Heather's son, Sean Cox. **BELOW:** Sue Johnson, who was informed on arrival at Bridlington Hospital for a scan that she was dead.

sage from a number she didn't know, claiming to be him. Insley's husband, Bill, dismissed the text as "a sick joke", but when making contact Cox would often use different numbers as his addict lifestyle meant he rarely used one phone for any length of time; so when she got a second text claiming to be from him, Insley called the number. When it was answered, she heard her son's voice on the end of the line. "We were freaked," Insley said.

Enlisting the help of police, Insley and her husband were able to track Cox down to confirm he really was alive. When she met him face to face, Insley said she went numb with shock. "I thought, oh my God, your funeral's tomorrow," she said. "I thought, I'm so happy he's alive, but I just went through all that mourning." Some weeks earlier a man who looked very much like Cox had been admitted to a hospital in Ottawa in a serious condition. A nurse who had treated Cox previously when he was recovering from an overdose thought she recognised him and called the family. Insley and other relatives actually visited the man in hospital without realising he was not Cox. They could not see his face clearly because it was partially obscured by a ventilator, and his arms with their distinctive tattoos were under a thermal blanket. "He had the same haircut, same thick hair, like my boy did – his

long eyelashes," Insley said. She blames both herself and the hospital for the mistaken identity. "It was a grave mistake on their part and I blame myself for it," she said, "but I believed it was him without a shadow of a doubt."

Cox, though, sees the incident in a positive light, believing he has "been given a second chance", and intends to approach life differently going forward. As for the deceased man, his identity remains unknown, although Insley had a handprint taken at the funeral home as a memento and it may prove possible to use this to identify him. *futurism.com*, 1 Mar 2024.

- Nick Fatouros, 34, from Montreal, Canada, returned from an extended stay in Costa Rica to find that the Quebec Government had decided he was dead. They had sent him a 14-page letter informing him of this and saying that they hoped to collect an outstanding speeding fine from his estate. "Wow, that's news to me!" said the definitely alive Fatouros. *D. Mirror*, 23 Mar 2024.

- Retired housekeeper Sue Johnson, 62, arrived for a scan at Bridlington Hospital only to find her ap-

pointment had been cancelled because she had been dead for four months, an error that also meant the carer's allowance she received for looking after her disabled husband, Bob, was briefly stopped. Arriving at the hospital, Johnson says, "I gave them my letter and their first words were, 'Oooh you're dead'. I said, 'Pardon?' I was in shock. Then they put something on the computer so I could have the scan and then they just said, 'Bye' and that's it." Johnson says she was "shaking like a leaf" after the experience and that Bob needed to take her for a coffee to calm her down.

Her GP later told her that the error had been fixed, but when she called the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) they told her "On the computer, you're dead", to which she replied: "I'm not. I'm still talking to you". The DWP have now reinstated her benefits, but Johnson still wants answers as all the agencies involved in the process have been assiduously passing the buck when it comes to admitting responsibility. "I need to find out why it happened, how and by whom," Johnson said. "And that person, whoever has pressed a button, shouldn't be working wherever they are." *BBC News*, 30 Apr 2024.



SIDELINES...

PINEAPPLE CHAOS

A viral TikTok video has caused chaos for the Spanish Mercado supermarket chain. It has prompted single Spaniards to visit the supermarkets between 7 and 8pm, put a pineapple upside down in their shopping trolley, then loiter in the wine aisle. This, the video claims, will signal that you are single and seeking a partner. Police have been called to some shops to quell pineapple-induced chaos, and Mercado have taken to removing pineapples from display before 7 o'clock. Previously, toting a pineapple has been used by swingers as a signal to indicate their willingness to swap partners. *BBC News*, 3 Sept 2024.

EGG MAN

Between 6 January and 8 April 2024, Layton Richards, 29, targeted 19 shops in a crime spree across Hampshire, Dorset and West Sussex. During his raids, he focused on Crème Eggs, shoplifting 798 of the gooey treats, which, once the law caught up with him, earned Richards an eight-month prison sentence from magistrates. *BBC News*, 1 Aug 2024.

UNGRATEFUL

When Joseph Ricciardella spotted a locally rare timber rattlesnake in the road in Connecticut, he stopped his car to try and move it to safety. Ricciardella threw a shirt over the snake, but as he tried to pick it up, it sank his fangs into his arm. He managed to drive to a nearby hospital before going into cardiac arrest, after which he was given antivenom and put in an induced coma to recover. *canoe.com*, 1 Aug 2024.

TOWERING ACHIEVEMENT

Richard Plaud, 47, from Montpellier-de-Médillan in France spent 4,200 hours building what he thought was a world record sized Eiffel Tower out of matchsticks. He used 706,000 matches and 23kg (51lbs) of glue to make the 23ft (7m) tall structure. Guinness World Records, though, were unimpressed, and refused him the record as he hadn't used commercial matchsticks. He had begun by using them, but after getting tired of chopping the heads off, he had asked manufacturers to supply him with just the sticks, which made him ineligible. After widespread outrage, Guinness relented, saying: "We were a little bit too harsh..." Richard's attempt truly is officially amazing. *Guardian*, 10 Feb 2024.



SIDELINES...

SATANIC SUM

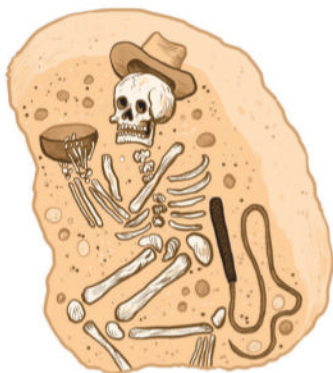
Horror film *Late Night with the Devil*, about a late-night talk show host who invites an apparently possessed girl onto his show, allegedly grossed \$666,666 in one day on its first weekend of release in the US. Producers denied they had manipulated the figure as a publicity stunt. *nme.com*, 25 Mar 2024.

NOT ROMANTIC

Shona Burney, 43, from Tavistock, Devon, was delighted when she found a diamond engagement ring in her jar of peanut butter on Valentine's Day, thinking that her boyfriend Gary Searle, 52, had hidden it there to propose to her. Searle, however, vehemently denied all knowledge of the ring, and they now believe it ended up in the jar during production. Burney said, "I've been waiting ages for him to propose," while Searle added, "I'm going to have to ask her to marry me now. If no one claims the ring we can use it, it's got a nice story." *Sun*, 23 Feb 2024.

REAL "GRAIL"

Archaeologists from the University of St Andrews in Scotland, digging in the Treasury at the ancient Nabataean city of Petra in Jordan, have discovered 12 skeletons buried beneath it. The Petra Treasury was used as the location of the Holy Grail in the film *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* and one of the of newly discovered skeletons was found holding a chalice-like ceramic vessel that looked remarkably similar to the *Last Crusade's* Holy Grail. "It really was this awesome moment of history imitating art," said Josh Gates, host of The Discovery Channel show *Expedition Unknown*, who was filming at the dig. *dailymail.co.uk*, 14 Oct 2024.



MARTIN ROSS

RECORD BREAKERS

The tallest, the shortest and a late-flowering romance



PHOTOS: GUINNESS WORLD RECORDS

TALLEST AND SHORTEST

To mark the publication of the 70th anniversary edition of the *Guinness Book of Records* – the first edition topped the British bestseller list at Christmas 1955 before going international the following year – Guinness World Records brought the world's tallest and shortest women together to take tea at London's Savoy Hotel. The tallest, Rumeysa Gelgi, 27, a researcher

and web developer from Turkey, stands at two metres 15.16cm (7ft) while Jyoti Amge, 30, an actress from India, is only 62.8cm (2ft) tall. Gelgi owes her record height to Weavers Syndrome, a rare condition that causes accelerated growth and skeletal deformities. Amege has achondroplasia, a form of dwarfism that results in reduced limb growth. *euronews.com*, 21 Nov 2024.

OLDEST NEWLYWEDS

In December, GWR awarded the record for the world's oldest newlyweds to Marjorie Fiterman and Bernie Littman. The couple met at a senior living facility in Philadelphia where Fiterman, 102, and Littman, 100, lived on the same floor. They had tied the knot in a traditional Jewish ceremony on 19 May after a nine year courtship. *nbcnews.com*, 13 Dec 2024.



PAUL DEVEREUX brings news of a potent Egyptian brew, solar symbols and a 3D Palæolithic map

A CUP OF KINDNESS

We have met Bes in previous columns – he was a rather kindly Egyptian god, associated with protection, healing, fertility and reproduction in general. Bes is depicted as a dwarfish part human, part feline being (“Bes” means “cat” in Nubian). His cult was very popular and though widespread throughout and beyond Egypt, and over a long time-span from New Kingdom Egypt (6th-11th centuries BC) up to the Roman Imperial period (30 BC-AD 486), is very poorly understood. The only firmly identified Bes cult centre in Egypt are the so-called “Bes Chambers” at Sakkara. Important to the cult were “Bes-Vases” – ceramic drinking vessels and cups, but they are enigmatic regarding provenance and purpose. In order to bring a little more understanding of their nature, a multidisciplinary team headed by Professor Davide Tanasi of the University of South Florida, have analysed a Bes-shaped mug in the collections of the Tampa Museum of Art in Florida. The origins of this object are believed to tentatively date to the 2nd century BC and was said to have been found in the El-Fayum district.

The researchers analysed scrapings from the inside of the cup using a combination of chemical and DNA techniques. This has confirmed that it once held a psychotropic and medicinal mixture, consisting of several plants including the hallucinogenic wild rue (*Peganum harmala*) and blue water lily (*Nymphaea nouchali*). Many of these plants are known to have uses related to childbirth and pregnancy. The researchers also identified a high level of human proteins, suggesting that human fluids of some sort had been added to the blend, as well as a fermented alcoholic liquid, probably derived from grapes. Evidence was found, too, of honey or royal jelly, sesame seeds, wheat, and possibly liquorice root. All in all, an extremely powerful drink. *University of South Florida Newsroom*, 14 Nov 2024; *World Archaeology* 129, 18 Jan 2025. Original paper in *Scientific Reports*, vol.14, article no. 27891. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-024-78721-8>

SOWING THE SUN

Around 3,000 BC, there was a mighty volcanic eruption in northern latitudes that pumped sulphur and ash high into the atmosphere. The exact location of the volcano has not been ascertained, but the scale of the eruption was such that evidence of the ash from it has



TOP: Stone disks with solar motifs discovered in Vasagård, Denmark. ABOVE: The Ségognole 3 Rock Shelter floor map. LEFT: Bes-shaped mug in the Tampa Museum of Art.

been found at both northern and southern poles. There had to have been a worldwide darkening of the skies. Ice cores from both Greenland and Antarctica show a significant sulphur signature dated around 2,900 BC. Other indications of the major volcanic event have been found in sediment layers of German lakes and in dendrochronological studies from the US. All are confirmation of what would have been a period of low-level sunlight and reduced temperatures having serious effects on crops and life threatening to human populations.

In 1995, flat, shale stones or “plaques” engraved with solar and other symbols, buried by Neolithic communities in apparently ceremonial ditches, along with pieces of broken pottery, animal bones and flint tools, began to be found on the Danish island of Bornholm. Hundreds of these flat Sun stones have now been unearthed during archaeological excavations at Vasagård on Bornholm. Dr Rune Iversen from the University of Copenhagen suggests

that the stones were probably buried in some solar cult in order to bring back sunlight and restore agricultural prosperity. A kind of symbolic sowing of the Sun. *Archaeology*, 21 Jan; *Sweden Herald*, 1 Feb 2025.

A GROOVY MAP

The Ségognole 3 rock shelter lies in the Paris Basin and was years ago discovered to contain a Stone Age engraving of a female sexual depiction associated with a horse image. Recent studies have revealed that modifications to the shelter’s structure were made in order that rain infiltration would flow through what is assumed represented the vulva and spill down onto the shelter’s floor. Further investigations have determined that the water flows along a carved network of grooves that relate to bumps in the shelter’s floor, forming what is effectively a miniature modelling of the major hills and rivers of the surrounding landscape. Researchers Medard Thiry and Anthony Miles, suggest that this is potentially “a world-first 3D-model of a Palæolithic territory”. *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*, 22 Dec 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ojoa.12316>



CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

307: "THE EVIL THAT MEN DO LIVES ON AFTER THEM"

(Title from Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*)
Written on 1 January 2025, day of the New Orleans attack.

As terrorist atrocities escalate around the world, it may not be a consolation but a reminder that such acts are in no way modern but go back to classical antiquity and (perhaps) beyond.

The word 'Terror' seems to have originated in a *Times* article on 30 January 1795, and was defined in English dictionaries by 1798 as 'Systematic use of terror as a policy'. This of course refers to Robespierre and the French Revolution.

Definitions naturally vary according to which side of the fence you are on. As *Beyond the Fringe* remarked of Mau Mau leader Jomo Kenyatta: "That was when he was a terrorist. Now we know he was a Freedom Fighter."

BBC World News dubbed 2024 the worst-ever year for children thanks both to terrorism per se and American school shootings (over 300, with many more going unreported).

A useful starting point here is Jonathan Fine's article "Political and Philological Origins of the term 'Terrorism' from the Ancient Near East to Our Times", *Middle Eastern Studies* 48.2 (2010), 271-88 – available online.

One snag. Many of the earliest examples given, especially Assyrian, do not really fit the bill, being more wartime atrocities than actual acts of domestic or international terror. Modern authorities frequently haver over whether a particular act qualifies as terroristic or simply individual. This uncertainty comes into play with some early Greek episodes, as do questions of motive.

One of the weirdest of ancient deaths (as frequently remarked in these columns) was that of the ferocious Athenian legislator Draco, smothered to death by hats and cloaks flung at him in the theatre at Aegina – couldn't he have ducked...?

Reporting this, the Byzantine Dictionary-Encyclopædia *Suda* (D495, ed. Adler) says the clothes-hurlers were admirers of Draco's laws. One might wonder how many people really liked a man who prescribed the death penalty for stealing a cabbage. It remains possible that they were out to get Draco, it being possible to question the *Suda* version, which was penned nearly 2,000 years later.

In 514 BC, the Athenian tyrant Hipparchus was assassinated by two lovers, Aristogeiton and Harmodius, who were forever afterwards celebrated as "Tyrant-



ABOVE: The tyrannicides Harmodius and Aristogeiton sticking it to Hipparchus in 514 BC.

Slayers'. One naturally here thinks of John Wilkes Booth who accompanied his murder of Lincoln with the cry *Sic Semper Tyrannis*. There is, in fact, a lot of democratic propaganda at work here. Hipparchus and his co-ruler brother Hippias were very popular with the people for their building and cultural policies. At this time, 'Tyrant' was a neutral Greek term, with none of its modern pejorative connotations. Also, Harmodius and Hipparchus were at odds over homosexual rivalries and other erotic disputes. So, it is permissible to see their 'immortal' deed as pure terrorism.

Documentary Sources: Aristotle, *Constitution of Athens* ch18; Herodotus, bk5 ch56; Thucydides (in particular) bk6 chs56-9.

In 461, Ephialtes, Democratic colleague of Pericles, was assassinated in Athens. Most of what little we know of him comes from Plutarch's *Life of Cimon* (chs16-8); not mentioned by Thucydides. The contemporary orator Antiphon (Or. 5. 68) says his killer was unknown. Generations later, Aristotle (*Constitution of Athens*, ch25. para4) dug up (from where?) the name of Aristodikos of Tanagra: hired hitman? personal grudge?). See further Robert Wallace, 'Ephialtes and the Areopagus,' *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 15 (1974), 259-69.

In 415, on the eve of the great (and ultimately doomed) Athenian attack on Syracuse (Sicily), all the Hermes statues

(somewhat akin to our garden gnomes) in the city were nocturnally vandalised. Aristophanes (*Lysistrata* 1093-4) jokes about 'Hermes-Smashers' sneaking around chipping away at their phalluses. Despite extensive official enquiries, the culprits remained and remain a mystery. Many suspected a drunken prank by the notorious Alcibiades and his mates. Others thought it might be the work either of Athenians opposed to the enterprise or Syracusans, both trying to get the invasion aborted on religious grounds. Nobody was killed. The incident might be judged cultural terrorism, somewhat akin to Isis/Taliban desecrations of ancient monuments. For more, see Thucydides (6. 27-9) and Andocides (himself accused of complicity), *On the Mysteries* (especially chs 10-2), and Debra Hanel's *The Mutilation of the Herms: Unpacking an Ancient Mystery* (2012). On some contemporary echoes, see Christopher Tripoulos's article of 7 June 2010 on *The National Herald* website.

Compare to the endless American school shootings and the Hamas atrocities of 7 October 2023, this grim bulletin from Thucydides (7.29): "The Thracians burst into Mycalessos, sacked the houses and temples, and butchered the inhabitants, sparing neither young nor old, methodically killing everyone they met, women and children alike, and even the farm animals and everything else they met."

Moving to Rome, there was an incident of domestic terrorism in 460 BC. It is recounted by the historian Livy (b3 chs15-21). A Sabine named Appius Herdonius with a gang of slaves and exiles seized the Capitol (shades of that 6 January in Washington), butchering everybody they could. Herdonius then injected an ideological note, giving a speech with the 'Non-negotiable Demand' to free the slaves. In response, the consuls and Senate first armed a number of citizens, then summoned their Tuscan allies to send an army, which put down the insurrection, killing Herdonius and punishing the captured individuals. See the excellent online paper by Ricardo Apostol. also RM Ogilvie's magisterial *Commentary on Livy* (1965), 423-8.

Sicarii ('Dagger Men' in Latin slang) are only attested in the two books of the Jewish historian Josephus (1st-century AD). They were an extremist offshoot of the Zealots, active in the Jewish uprising against Rome (AD 66-73). It is possible that Barabbas in the New Testament was one, less so Judas Iscariot whom some have so dubbed. The term became an all-purpose smear like 'Communist' in 1950s America. St Paul was accused of being one (Acts ch21 para38). They attacked both Romans and alleged Jewish sympathisers. Notable victims included High Priest Jonathan and 700 women and children in the siege of Ein Gedi. On one occasion, as their modern counterparts, they made a deal to release the kidnapped secretary of Temple Governor Eleanor in exchange for 10 of their own. When finally crushed in AD 73, they committed mass suicide at Masada. For more, see J Stewart D'Alessio & Lisa Stoizenberg, 'Sicarii and the Rise of Terrorism' (online) and Mike Brighton, 'The Sicarii in Acts: A New Perspective' (also on line), plus several other websites. This group is often seen as the prototype of the later Order of Assassins, Japanese Ninja, and Indian Thugs.

Dio Cassius (bk71 ch4) describes the revolt of the Boukoloi (Herdsman) in Egypt under Antoninus Pius (AD 138-61). Apart from ravaging the Delta, they allegedly practised human sacrifice and cannibalism. Of the many modern accounts, see especially Katherine Bedouin in *Phœnix* 64 (2010), 386-96 who draws interesting connections between this group and socio-environmental concerns. Since it features in contemporary Greek novels, the gang must have had considerable local impact, well discussed by John Hilton, *Piracy, Pillage and Plunder in Antiquity* (2018) – abstract online.

Ideological terrorism erupted in fourth-century AD Africa, committed by groups known as 'Circumcellions' (Wanderers About the Countryside). They were an extremist offshoot of the Christian heretics known as Donatists. Like modern Islamist groups, their War-Cry was 'Glory to God'. They meted out violence with ceremonial clubs nicknamed 'Israels'. Their ranks included women devoted to chastity. Since



LEFT: Alcibiades was accused of vandalising the herms of Athens in 415 BC. BELOW: Masada, Israel, where the *Sicarii* committed mass suicide in AD 73.

The Sicarii are often seen as the prototype of the later Order of Assassins, Japanese Ninja and Indian thugs



our main source of knowledge is their arch-enemy Augustine, the extent of their criminality may be exaggerated, but their impact was undeniably large. I discussed this subject at length in one of my earliest articles, in *Nottingham Mediaeval Studies* 6 (1962), 1-11, and am covering it again in a future column on Peasant Revolts.

Finally, and most fortuitous, an item comporting for me some nostalgia, it marking my FT début, not a column but a letter (FT129:51).

The letter provided ancient parallels to Fort's accounts (*Books*, 884-91) of people being randomly stabbed by hatpins.

A passage (bk57 ch11 para5) in the Roman historian Dio Cassius says this of the reign of Domitian (AD81-96):

"Some persons made a business of smearing pins with poison and then stabbing whomever they wished. Many persons thus attacked died without even knowing the cause, but many people were arrested and punished. And this sort of thing happened not only in Rome but over virtually the whole world."

This is actually from an 11th-century Byzantine Epitome; Dio's full text is lost. He might or might not have told us how many people were involved and how so many came to be detected. Were any women involved? I ask this because Fort declined to believe they were in his cases, remarking "Women don't do these things. They have their own devilries."

Later (bk73 ch14 para5), Dio mentions a recurrence of such attacks under Commodus (180-96, the emperor in *Gladiator*), cross-referencing the earlier outbreak. Almost a century seems a long time to talk about Copy-Cat killings, but...?

Given its subject matter, I am rather glad to finish this piece.



Would you Adam and Eve it?

DAVID HAMBLING says a reversal of the Earth's magnetic poles is coming – but don't panic!

The idea that the Earth's magnetic poles can and do switch places has gone the full cycle from being 'damned' as impossible, to scientific acceptance, to rebirth as controversy. Social media is abuzz with talk of how pole reversal is the real explanation for climate change, and how it is about to bring about the apocalypse. How worried should we be?

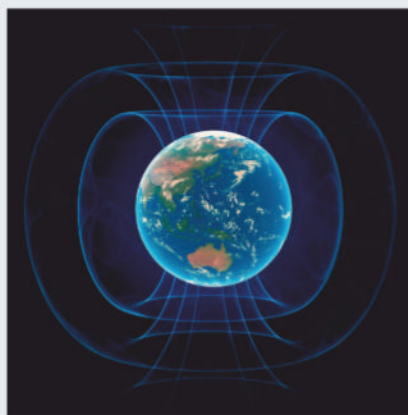
The Earth's core is liquid metal, mainly iron with some nickel, as hot as 6,000°C and consequently in a constant state of motion like a pot of boiling water. The movement of this conducting material gives rise to electric currents and creates a dynamo action, producing the world-spanning magnetic field which makes compasses point North.

A century ago scientists had worked out that the geomagnetic field had left an imprint in geology. Minerals formed by volcanic eruptions took up the same magnetic orientation as the Earth's field. What was curious was that some rocks were magnetised the opposite way to what was expected, with North and South reversed.

Japanese geophysicist Motonori Matuyama presented the first systematic survey in the 1920s showing that, based on rocks found on the ocean floor, at certain times in prehistory the magnetic field had been reversed. This seemingly bizarre theory gained little traction. There was no theoretical basis for explaining how such a thing could occur. But as more data were gathered at different spots and the ages of different rock formations were confirmed, a pattern emerged which became impossible to deny. By the 1950s it was widely accepted that the magnetic poles must flip regularly, with an interval thought to be about a million years. But things soon became more complicated.

The magnetic field was livelier than it first seemed. Sensitive instruments showed that the field strength varied constantly, and far from being fixed in place at the geographic poles, the magnetic poles wander about erratically. The magnetic North Pole, which was moving at about 10 miles (16km) a year, now moves 34 miles (55km) a year. But pole reversals are not the result of a long migration, but of a complete reversal.

As best as scientists can explain it, turbulence in the constant motion of the liquid metal causes the reversals. Small fluctuations draw in more material and suddenly the whole system flips over in a demonstration of a chaotic system. This



Humanity's ancestors lived through the last few reversals, so we should survive too

means the reversals occur at what look like random intervals. While the movements of the planets follow a pattern as orderly as clockwork, pole reversals are about as predictable as a roulette wheel.

The geologic record shows that there have been some 183 polarity intervals in the last 83 million years. This represents the furthest back that scientists can accurately track the field based on measurements from surface rocks. The time period between reversals is known as a chron, and chrons vary dramatically in length. During one three-million-year period about 42 million years ago, there were 17 reversals. By contrast there have been 'superchrons' of 10 million years with no reversals at all.

Most people only want to know two things about geomagnetism though: when will the next pole reversal occur, and what will happen when it does?

The last reversal was 780,000 years ago, so the current chron is longer than the average for the last few million years. This has led many to claim that reversal is overdue and could happen any day now. Others note how random the intervals have been and that there is no good basis for predictions.

When it does happen, the next pole reversal will certainly not be the end of the world. None of the many previous pole reversals coincided with mass extinctions, suggesting that the effects are less than

cataclysmic. Humanity's ancestors lived through the last few reversals, so we should survive too.

On the other hand, there will certainly be some impact. The Earth's magnetic field acts as a shield against some types of solar radiation. The northern lights show how charged particles are channelled to higher latitudes, so the rest of us are not affected. During a pole reversal the Earth's magnetic field may drop to a 20th of its normal strength, so we might be exposed to more radiation. This would affect humans less than electronics, which can be damaged or disrupted by cosmic particles.

This would not happen overnight. Like steering the proverbial supertanker, the flows of trillions of tons of liquid metal do not change course at high speed. Geological data suggests that a pole reversal takes something between several hundred and several thousand years to occur.

According to boring conventional science, anyway.

The far more exciting 'cataclysmic pole shift hypothesis' gives the phenomenon the Hollywood Disaster Movie treatment. Also known as 'The Adam and Eve theory', it is gaining momentum on TikTok, the oracle for self-styled independent scientific researchers. This theory, also given airtime by Joe Rogan, holds that every 6,500 years the Earth experiences disasters of Biblical proportions like Noah's flood. One suggestion is that climate change is actually a manifestation of this effect, and we can expect massive floods, tidal waves and other catastrophes soon.

Naturally scientists have rebutted these ideas, with NASA in particular issuing posts debunking the ever-spreading memes. There is no correlation between changes in the geomagnetic field and the climate, and the effects are on a much longer timescale than the theory's proponents suggest. Nor is there any evidence for other non-magnetic weather effects, tsunamic or other phenomena.

A catchy headline will always seize the public imagination more effectively than scientists trying to explain complex effects. Social media, increasingly significant as a news source, is more friendly to simple, exciting ideas than to nuance. Pole reversal is certainly coming, though probably not for a few millennia, and will not be catastrophic. But we will see a lot more scare stories in social media before then, with scientific rebuttals trailing well behind.

SPOOKY SHENANIGANS | Adele causes a property downturn, plus a jealous Jamaican ghost and a misunderstanding in Myanmar

PHANTOM STREISAND EFFECT

Pop chanteuse Adele has inadvertently ended up at the centre of a ghost-related planning battle. Following the success of her album *21* in 2012, the singer rented the sprawling former convent of Lock House in Partridge Green, West Sussex, and while there told CNN interviewer Anderson Cooper that she found the place “quite scary”, adding “I’m not rattling around here on my own. It gives me the creeps.” She moved out again a few months later. Now, the owner is attempting to get planning permission to convert it into several smaller units, saying that despite repeated efforts over 14 years, they have been unable to sell the property, explaining, “The first tenant, Adele, stayed for six months and blighted the property by saying it is haunted,” which, the planning application continues, “negatively impacted future marketing efforts and continues to affect the property’s reputation to this day.” The property is currently up for sale at £5,995,000.

The publicity around this claim doesn’t seem to have entirely helped, as it has highlighted all kinds of local tales, creating the impression that the small village of Partridge Green is a severely haunted location. Bethany Illes, 28, a manager at local pub The Green Man, told *The Guardian* that the pub was haunted by a cat ghost, while the gardener for another local pub described a Victorian girl dressed in white who would sit on a windowsill, watching him as he worked, whom he had seen “hundreds of times”.

A local cottage was revealed to have been the site of a sustained and intrusive haunting allegedly resulting from an incident during the war where a German aircraft was shot down over the building, with the engine crashing through the roof onto a bed, narrowly missing a woman and child, while the pilot’s corpse ended up wedged in the rafters. Another cottage was claimed to have a persistent presence in the form of a “bloke dressed like an 18th-



“I’m not rattling around here on my own. It gives me the creeps”

century soldier”. Even the nearby Budgens supermarket, which closed in 2023, turns out to have been a hotbed of paranormal activity. Local ghosthunter Graham duHeaume said, “Boy, was that haunted! There was a hell of a lot of stuff going on there,” recounting stories about blocks of cheese and bread flying off shelves, a jar that was suspended in midair before dropping to the floor, odd shadows and footsteps, and mysterious smells of burning tobacco and bonfires. *BBC News*, 23 Jan; *theguardian.com*, 25 Jan 2025.

NO GHOST

Following reports of strange cries in a forest near the Myanmar border, police in Mae Sot, Tak province, Thailand, dispatched officers to the area to investigate. After some hours of searching, they heard the cries, and when they called back, the voice responded which allowed them to track down the source. The cries were coming from a Chinese man,



LEFT: Singer Adele, whose claims that Lock House, her sprawling former home in West Sussex (above), was haunted have allegedly made it hard to sell.

Liu Chuanyi, 22, who had become lost while visiting the area and had fallen down a 12m- (39ft) deep well in the forest, where he had been stuck for three days without food or water. He had suffered a fractured left wrist, concussion and bruises, and had been shouting for help for a brief period once an hour to conserve his energy. It transpired that locals had been hearing his calls all the time, but didn’t understand them as they were in Chinese. Instead, they came to the conclusion that the cries were spirits haunting the forest, so stopped going outside after dark and did not investigate the source of the noise. Rescue services were able to extract Chuanyi from the well, and he made a full recovery in hospital. *independent.co.uk*. 4 Dec 2024.

ANTI-GHOST PANTIES

A 42-year-old widow in Jamaica named only as ‘VS’ wrote to the *Jamaica Gleaner’s* “Ask the Pastor” column about a novel problem. She explained that as a Christian, she had ignored the local superstition that on the death of her husband, a woman should wash herself with a specific type of soap and put on red underwear to keep his jealous ghost at bay. While she experienced no prob-

lems initially, 40 days after her husband’s death, she said, “This man visited his house. I could feel his presence. Anyhow, I prayed and went to bed. Later on in the night I could feel him on me, but I couldn’t wake up,” adding that “in the morning I knew he had molested me. I was very wet, and my underwear was pulled down. I was very surprised.” She had been advised by her grandmother that she really needed to protect herself after this, as her husband’s ghost would keep coming back to prevent her having a relationship with another man. Not only did she need to wear the right underwear, but she also now needed to destroy her bed as it had been bought by her husband. VS said she had tried to repel the ghost with incense, but was reluctant to do as her grandmother instructed as “it is a lovely king size bed, why should I destroy it?” and was seeking the pastor’s advice on alternative ways of deterring the ghost. Unimpressed by the superstitious approach to exorcising the spectral abuser, he agreed that the bed did not need burning, but said VS should gather a group of sisters from her church to pray round it and demand that the ghost go back to where it came from. *Jamaica Gleaner*, 28 Nov-4 Dec, 2024.



WHO PUT THAT THERE? | From bottles of urine (in various hues) to creepy stashes of cuddly toys and baffling bananas...



TOM HONAN

ABOVE LEFT: Some of the Pasadena Pee Bandit's offerings. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The railway bridge on Dublin's Drumcondra Road became an unusual tourist attraction when some started leaving cherry tomatoes on it. **BELOW:** The mysterious plate of bananas that has been appearing in the Nottinghamshire village of Beeston.

GIVING THE PISS?

Residents in Pasadena, California, have been plagued by someone leaving full bottles of urine on an electrical junction box near the intersection of Colorado Boulevard and San Rafael Avenue in the city. "For the past two years an electrical box in my neighbourhood had been overrun with bottles of piss," said local Derek Milton. "Different size bottles, different colours and sometimes complemented with a hand-drawn note." His friend Grant Yansura added, "Stacks of them, you know, nine, 10, 11 bottles, all different colours, shades – from like an amber hue to more of a healthy, golden, lighter yellow. But some are really dark and concerning." Every time the bottles are removed, they are replaced. Modifications to the box to deter the "Pee Bandit", including mounting steel pyramids on top of it, have not succeeded. The first pyramid was torn off completely and a second was severely dented, leaving a flat area on which new bottles have been placed. Attempts to identify the culprit have also proved fruitless, although a man has been filmed depositing the bottles and locals have tried to talk to him. "We think he's an artist," Yansura said, "because I've never really under-

stood art, or really get art, and when we couldn't figure out what was going on and I couldn't get it, that's when we realised maybe it's art." Yansura admitted that the efforts he and Milton had put into tracking down the culprit had "kinda backfired on us, because now we're the pee guys". *patch.com*, 2 Oct; *abc7.com*, 3 Oct 2024.

BEESTON BANANAS

Once a month, for more than a year, a plate of bananas has been appearing opposite a church on the corner of Abbey Road and Wensor Avenue in Beeston, Nottinghamshire. About 15 to 20 are left each time, always whole, but peeled. "I think it has been happening for at least a year. I see them all the time – it's difficult to remember exactly when," said local resident Claire Fenwick. "I've never seen anyone leaving them. They could be for animals, but I've never seen a peck taken out of them." James Oviedo, who walks his dog past the corner most days, said he thought the bananas had been appearing for two years. "It's quite strange. There's always a big bunch of them peeled on the plate and they always appear to be drizzled with what seems to be honey," he said. While

many locals seem oblivious, others are desperate to know what is going on. A common suspicion is that they are some kind of religious offering, or maybe an attempt to feed local wildlife, although the bananas don't seem to get eaten. Lauren, who lives adjacent to the banana site, says she thought they were left during the night, or early in the morning. "I've walked past in the evening and there's been nothing there, then [the plate] is there the next morning," she said. "I hope it's nothing untoward like someone trying to poison animals." Clare Short, a local volunteer litter-picker, said the bananas always appeared on the second of each month, and she briefly put up a sign reading: "Please, respectfully, no more bananas! The uncollected plates and rotting bananas leave such a mess. Wishing a happy new year to you all!" She took it down again, though, when it started attracting attention, saying she didn't "want to make it like a feud. I don't want it to become a big thing," adding, "If they could come back and clean up the mess a few days later that would be lovely. I'm going to keep an eye on it." No one, though, seems to be any closer to identifying

the person depositing the fruit or working out why they do it. *theguardian.co.uk*, 6 Jan 2025.

COKE STASH

In Redditch, West Midlands, it is a bottle of cola. An unnamed man who walks the footpath alongside the River Arrow in the town several times a week wrote on Facebook that for three years, every time he has passed a bench located just before the path goes under the Coventry Highway, he has found a £1 two-litre plastic bottle of Best-In discount cola sitting on a plastic bag next to it. The bottle is always almost full, with just a couple of inches drunk. Every time he sees the bottle, the walker picks it up and puts it in a bin, but on his next visit, an identical bottle has taken its place. People responding to the post have speculated that it could be in memory of someone, with one saying "Maybe someone's ashes have been sprinkled there, and someone's going and shares the coke with them?" However, another person claims to have seen the coke man, saying, "The gentleman in question walks from the Easemore underpass along to this bench with a carrier bag at 1-2pm, sits there for a while and then returns, leaving the bottle there," but





isn't able to throw any light on his identity or motive. *Sunday Mercury*, 20 Oct 2024.

MYSTERY TOMS

Dublin gained a new tourist attraction in early January when someone spread a large number of cherry tomatoes along the parapet of a bridge on the Drumcondra Road, crossing a canal and a railway line. Some of the tomatoes were whole, while others had been sliced in half, and as they arrived during a cold snap they ended up frozen to the bridge. This attracted the attention of passers-by, and soon other tomatoey offerings were being deposited on the parapet, including larger salad tomatoes and sachets of tomato ketchup. It started gaining attention on social media too, with posts about the tomatoes going viral on X and TikTok dubbing it the "Cherry Tomato Bridge". As a result, it got marked on Google Maps, and labelled as both a shrine and a historical landmark, gaining five star reviews and comments like "A truly special place. There's nowhere on earth like it. You can just feel the magic". People have started making special trips to see the bridge, leaving yet more tomatoes, along with notes saying things like "You're looking ripe today!" and, for some reason, singing *That's Amore* by Dean Martin, believed to relate to a TV ad for tinned tomatoes. *Metro.co.uk*, 13 Jan 2025.

STUFFED IN THE WALL

While renovating their house near Spectacle Lake on Vancouver Island in Canada, Connor Nijse and Brianne Hinkkuri made a bizarre find when they pulled back some plasterboard in their garage. Instead of insulation, the wall had 115 soft toys packed into it. "There were dozens of stuffed animal eyes staring back at me," said Nijse. "I was in disbelief." Nijse shared his find on TikTok, which prompted a variety of speculative theories, some more probable than others. "One woman reached out saying this must be a serial killer house and that the family were adopting and killing orphans, and the stuffed animals belonged to



People suggested the toys might be packed with drugs or cash

them," said Nijse, adding, "People watch too much true crime on television." Others suggested that the toys might be packed with drugs or cash, but Nijse said: "We opened up a couple of them, it was just stuffing. There's nothing good in any of them." Nijse and Hinkkuri, though, have a far more mundane answer. They think that the previous inhabitants, who lived in the property for 30 years, used toys that once belonged to their grown-up children as a cost-saving way

of insulating the garage when they built it in the early 2000s. "Not quite as exciting as a serial killer," says Nijse, "But that's what makes sense to us." An unexpected result of the discovery is that "People are telling us they recognise stuffies from their childhood and that they'd love to have them again," said Nijse. As a result, they have been sending toys all over the world; they sent a pink elephant to Las Vegas, a brown bear to Indiana, a pair of yellow ducks to the UK and a plaid monkey to South Carolina. It has also caught the attention of Nijse's work colleagues. "The girls at work have started calling me 'Teddy,'" he said. "I'm not really sure how I feel about that." As for the rest of the toys, Nijse is putting some of them back in

the wall, "Just to make it a little weirder for the next guy. Pay it forward in a strange sort of way." *langleysadvancetimes.com*, 8 Nov 2024.

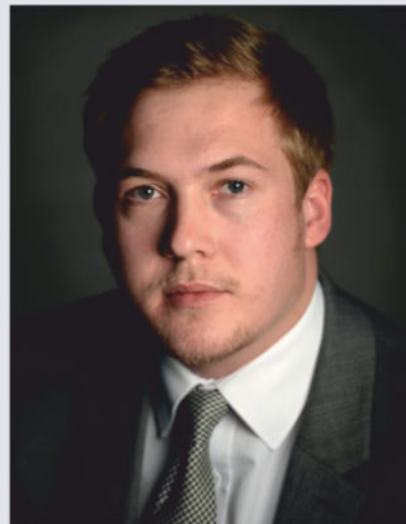
CABBAGE MOUNTAIN

Waking up one morning, Elizabeth Shoemaker and her family found that someone had dumped an entire truck load of cabbages in their barnyard at Willowhead Family Farm at Elora, near Guelph in Canada. "One of our neighbours was picking up something from our yard yesterday morning and we went out and there were cabbages everywhere," said Shoemaker. As the farm mainly grows cash crops and specialty cut flowers, a pile of cabbages was the "last thing you expect to go and find in your yard in the morning," she said, adding, "We checked our security cameras and then we saw the waste management truck come in on Tuesday morning at 10am and then they dropped it off and we had no clue." She followed this up with the truck's owners, but they too were baffled. "They just can't figure out where the cabbages came from and it was their trucks," Shoemaker said. Appealing for information from anyone who might be missing a truck full of cabbages, she added, "If someone still wants their cabbages, they're welcome to have them, but I think we're probably just going to end up composting them. We'll just dump them into the manure pile and wait for the smell." Further investigation at the waste company did eventually get to the bottom of the mystery: an IT error had led to the truck being sent to Willowhead instead of the biogas plant the cabbages were meant for. "The driver didn't know any different because it was the first time they had ever accepted a load of cabbages," said Shoemaker, who did go on to compost the vegetables, saying "We still think it's very funny, everyone's in super good spirits about it, so it's nice. It all turned out good in the end." *guelphtoday.com*, 21+25 Nov 2024.



Myth-making in Cannock Chase

ALAN MURDIE is sceptical about the Staffordshire forest being a 'window area' for weirdness



ABOVE LEFT: The woods of Cannock Chase. ABOVE RIGHT: Local journalist Jamie Brassington – is he set to become the Arthur Shuttlewood of Staffordshire?

"The forest seemed to tighten its hold on my senses, pulling me deeper into its heart and stirring feelings of claustrophobia. If there was ever a place for spectral beings to reside, this would be it – with countless hiding places amongst the shadows and trees."

So writes journalist Jamie Brassington, a reporter from *Birmingham Live*, about a woodland walk he took mid-morning in August 2024 at Cannock Chase in Staffordshire (*Birmingham Live*, 27 Aug 2024). Bizarre stories of a wide variety of apparitions and entities have become associated with this 50 square mile (130km²) tree-covered area and were recently given fresh impetus by a wave of repetition in local and national media in 2023 and 2024. Cannock Chase is alleged to be "one of the most haunted places in Britain", and helping foster this notion is Jamie Brassington himself, who seems to make it his business to write about these woods every few months, repeating stories emanating from keen paranormal investigators. For instance, ghost hunter Robert Pulme avers Cannock Chase produces "lots of reports of a 'Black eyed girl'... At first, she appears like a normal girl and walkers are worried a little girl is lost in the woods. Then they see her eyes and she just disappears. It is terrifying." Robert believes this black-eyed child died in a diphtheria outbreak in the 1800s (*Stoke*

I am afraid I cannot view such grainy and ambiguous footage as proof that spirits roam

on *Trent Sentinel*, 1 Feb 2024). Concurrent rumours also place other extraordinary phantoms and entities, markedly different from the more mundane and even banal apparitions routinely reported in other places, with heady and fervent tales of werewolves, UFOs, a 'Pigman' and a Bigfoot and even that a 'Roswell-style incident occurred there (see **FT306:70-72**).

Mr Brassington's verdict on this dense Staffordshire woodland is: "I can see why people get spooked." At this rate, it won't be surprising if the Great God Pan puts in an appearance soon.

A keen journalist can often play a pivotal role in creating an iconic wonder-spot: for example, Alex Campbell at Loch Ness or Arthur Shuttlewood at Warminster. Used to bolster 'Black-Eyed Girl' stories is a blurry image (described as 'a blotch') obtained from a drone camera in Cannock, pictures from these flying camera platforms having joined the variety of 'proofs' offered up by tech-conscious ghost hunters. The use of drones for spotting ghosts was

pioneered by the Syfy TV Channel in 2012 with occasional successes claimed (e.g. the supposedly 'clear as day' image of 'a ghost riding horse' captured at Berkeley Castle where Edward II reputedly suffered the most unpleasant death of any English king in 1327. (See *Gloucestershire Live*, 16 April 2018). Offered concerning Cannock Chase is a nine-year-old YouTube clip, "Black eyed girl Cannock Chase ghost – quadcopter drone footage" viewed in excess of 1.9 million times, posted by 'Furious Otter' on 18 April 2015. Highlighted once again in early 2023 and again in 2024, it sparked a fresh wave of stories about horrifying ghosts stalking the forest.

Now I don't rule out drone cameras having some use in psychical research. For instance, the deployment of a drone might prove very informative in a poltergeist case with a property suffering bombardment by a stone-flinging spook where ground-based witnesses have the impression of stones materialising mid-air. But in a tree-covered location like Cannock Chase with a great many complexities of light and shadow potentially affecting images, I am afraid I cannot view such grainy and ambiguous footage as tangible proof that spirits roam.

Reservations must also be expressed concerning an ominous footprint, supposedly from an unknown creature, announced in November 2021 by

investigator Lee Brickley (see **FT416:5, 417:29**). This discovery followed a tip-off from another drone user, Mr Bickley saying he received “an anonymous email” from a man “flying a remote-control plane over Gentleshaw Common at Cannock Chase who said he’d seen something unusual.” He continues: “With his description of the location, I went out there straight away and found the footprint.” (*Stoke on Trent Live*, 15 Nov 2021).

Now I haven’t read Mr Brickley’s lengthy list of publications about Cannock Chase, starting with *UFOs, Werewolves & The Pig-Man: Exposing England’s Strangest Location – Cannock Chase*, reporting sightings of dogmen and werewolves in the area; before wholly laughing off the idea let’s remember there is that notorious story of the Hexham Heads... But regarding the footprint, his comment – “I was astounded... I’d never seen a footprint that large in my life, and it was clearly not made using a mould or cast” – if accurately reported, begs a question about forensic analysis.

Certainly, if Mr Bickley was Robinson Crusoe on a desert island, the discovery of a single footprint would be of huge significance. However, Cannock Forest is no desert island. rather a place tramped over by thousands of visitors annually. If he has never seen a footprint this big before, how does he exclude it being produced by a mould or cast? Unfortunately, investigators can be emotionally eager to find indications of the anomalous, so they may be unconsciously biased in the interpretation of results.

Furthermore, the possibility of both the email and footprint forming part of a wider hoax does not seem to be being considered. Loosely controlled sites in the open supply fertile territory for anomaly pranksters, demonstrated by the manufacturing of crop circles in fields in the 1990s, at Loch Ness during peak periods of interest in 1933-34 and the 1970s, Bigfoot impersonators stomping around in rural parts of the USA, and ‘duende’ or elf videos fabricated in Latin America in recent years.

What is also noticeable is a lack of identifiable local witnesses appearing in the press to confirm unusual things are going on, especially so amongst those in close daily contact with the forest (other than those already hunting for Bigfoot hideouts, UFO crash sites and picnic spots for encountering ghostly children). Cannock Chase is managed by



TOP: Drone footage labelled “Black eyed girl Cannock Chase ghost” (or is it a stray Ewok?) has been viewed nearly two million times. **ABOVE:** Another image supposedly showing the black-eyed girl.

BELOW: Investigator Lee Brickley has shared stories of Cannock Chase’s Pig-Man and other entities.

Forestry England, whose workers ought to be supplying sightings if the forest is really a paranormal hotspot, in the same way that staff at certain National Trust properties report ghostly encounters, despite a former official policy of never mentioning them (see *Ghosts: Spooky Stories and Eerie Encounters from the National Trust*, 2006, by Sian Evans). As I write, Forestry England seems currently more concerned with organising live concerts in the forest for June 2025.

Of course, it can be said that neither within laboratories nor outside them do psychical or fortean phenomena manifest to order or ever prove easily repeatable, something to reflect on alongside the idea that Cannock Chase is some

kind of ‘window area’ through which other dimensions enter.

Biologist Lyall Watson wrote in *The Romeo Error* (1975): “Periodically, all hell breaks loose in one of these places and poltergeists start flinging things around, apparitions and unidentified people appear, people and sometimes vehicles unaccountably disappear, mysterious fires break out and there may even be hysteria or a form of mass madness.” The stories circulating around Cannock Chase may confirm the last, but not perhaps in the way Watson originally intended.

This notion of window areas is seductive, and nothing should in principle be ruled out. Peter McCue’s book *Zones of Strangeness: An Examination of Paranormal and UFO Hot Spots* (2012)





GHOSTWATCH

PAUL GORVIET / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

undertakes a detailed examination of some alleged locations and more recently in *The Highest Strangeness* (2024) cryptozoologist Richard Freeman reports how some stories about Cannock Chase attribute phenomena to an occult group opening up such a portal.

But noticeably, all local newspapers running Cannock Chase ghost stories keep doing is recycling a constant set of second- or third-hand claims, a feature typical of much local coverage of ghosts today. Twenty years ago, subscribing to a press cutting agency, as diligent researchers did in the past, would get you a sizeable crop of local newspaper reports involving directly interviewing witnesses. You would find original accounts from baffled motorists, puzzled publicans and worried householders of strange things seen or glimpsed. Let us not forget some good cases emerged this way across the years – e.g. Borley Rectory, the Battersea Poltergeist and the Enfield Poltergeist.

However, repeat this exercise today and odds are you end up with little more than a collection of cuttings only concerning ghost hunting groups and their doings, often also posted on social media, with original testimony sidelined or omitted. Many of these groups themselves prove rather transient, blinking in and out existence after sharing little beyond their own narrow circles. Undoubtedly, the decline in British local newspapers is a factor, along with the trend for people taking their joys, woes and everything else online. Fact-checking, tracing original witnesses and the search for corroboration in a manner which professional journalists such as Dennis Bardens, the creator of *Panorama*, and Victor Sims insisted were necessary with hauntings half a century ago seem to have ceased. (See George Owen and Victor Sims, *Science and the Spook*, 1971)).

This decline in reporting standards is most apparent with Cannock Chase, where the press fails to find and interview any independent eyewitness (it would also make for a much better story if they did). Instead, a place is being made marvellous by simple repetition of stories (which is not the same as corroboration).

It is a lesson that all ghost hunters should learn and keep learning. Branding places hotbeds of alleged anomalies encourages suggestible people into seeing or exaggerating things. When enough stories about a particular place achieve critical mass through continued re-tellings orally, in print or on-line, they become self-propagating.

With Cannock Chase one starting



ABOVE: Wouldn't Forestry Commission workers have reported at least some strange sightings?

point in print might be an article, "The Legendary Black Cats of the Midlands" by Philip Solomon, which appeared in *Psychic News* in 2001. The judgment of Solomon was that Cannock generated "more reports of unexplained large non-British cats than anywhere else in the Midlands does." (*Psychic News*, 8 Dec 2001.) From this, a notion got about that pumas might connect up with UFOs and psychic events (an idea dating to the 1960s – see *Can You Speak Venusian*, 1972, by Patrick Moore). Then in 2006 Nick Redfern suggested a Bigfoot-style creature roamed Cannock Chase, which might possibly have been the scene of a Roswell-type UFO incident. Garbled UFO-lore of grey aliens with dark eyes may then have encouraged ideas of the morphologically similar 'black eyed kids' of popular ghostlore (see **FT322:26-32**).

Events arising from purely normal causation may then be inflated or embroidered into exotic encounters for people pre-dispositioned towards psychic explanations.

A lifetime ago, a similar process happened with Borley, Essex, after the publication of Harry Price's books *The Most Haunted House in England* (1940) and *The End of Borley Rectory* (1945). James Turner moved onto the former rectory site in 1946. In 1951 his *My Life with Borley Rectory* provided a fictionalised sketch of actual experience contending with sensation seekers traipsing all over what was now Turner's private land and gardens where he was trying to grow mushrooms commercially. Trespassers and curiosity seekers alleged all kinds of mystical experiences. The sudden snapping of a twig, a rustling bush, a flash of light or the wind moaning in branches might all be misinterpreted as something

sinister. (One might wonder if some of them had been eating mushrooms rather than just walking where they grew, but this was the more sensible 1940s).

Today, at Cannock Chase, exactly the same happens, judging by reckless YouTube footage shared by over-excited people flocking into the woods after pub-closing time, hoping to scare themselves silly and apparently succeeding. Regrettably, their breathless clips fail to produce unambiguous evidence of these individuals encountering paranormal entities. In fact, I venture to suggest their reactions would be very different if they had.

A key difference with Borley is that Turner and some other locals did also report anomalous experiences of their own, even if these did not emerge until years later, and many villagers saw nothing (see *Borley Rectory: The Final Analysis*, 2003, by Ted Babbs and Claudine Mathias).

And one rather telling story has passed largely unnoticed in *Birmingham Live* for 10 February 2023. Entitled "Life next to 'haunted' Midlands Forest where people hear 'children crying from within'" – it reveals the major concern of local residents is not ghosts but drug abuse and vehicles being driven about in the forest at night. One lady was quoted as saying: "I used to walk up the road, on my own, in the dark. Since coronavirus, we have got a lot of drug activities."

There will always be people whose imaginations are somewhat over-active, especially when passing through woodland when dusk is falling or after dark. Thus, I suspect impromptu ghost hunts will continue to thrive as an alternative to a night out in Stafford or Stoke on Trent.



WEIRDNESS IN WARWICK

Rob Gandy reports from Warwick's Unitarian Chapel on the 2024 USPS Conference

The Unitarian Society for Psychical Studies (USPS)¹ is one of only three psychical research groups with a theological background,² and it has significant archives.³ Founded in 1965, it has boasted Professor Henry Habberley Price, Dr Robert Crookall, Arthur Koestler, Sir Alister Hardy and Peter Underwood among its presidents and vice presidents. Its well-attended Annual Conference took place on 28 September 2024 in Warwick. David Taylor, USPS's indefatigable Secretary, had invited three FT regulars to speak: Alan Murdie, Mark Fox and myself, with Jeremy Harte hosting a stall for the Folklore Society.

I opened with my presentation about 'Haunted Roads', and stressed that I am not a 'Paranormal Expert'; I simply collect testimonies from witnesses of strange phenomena, seeking patterns that might exist. I described how I accidentally got involved with investigating such events, detailed the classic vanishing hitchhiker urban legend, and outlined my research approach. I set out what I considered the best, most bizarre cases from my files, and began with a selection relating to the Old Man of Halsall Moss. (FT328:32-39) The audience was clearly amused to hear about the woman who wanted to take the ghost in her car back home to show her husband, and curious about the talking phantom hitchhiker on the Coastal Road near Southport. The Ruskington Horror (FT401:32-38, 402:38-43) had several cases on one specific nondescript stretch of road, usually of the 'vanishing jaywalker' type; and I highlighted author and broadcaster Charlie Connelly's uncanny experience. Other Lincolnshire cases included the 12-foot tall Scotter Road Spectre (FT411:48-52), the gibbet on Tom Otter's Lane and the totally inexplicable case of the Girl in the Nightdress (FT416:44-48). With time running out, I skipped events relating to motorbikes



ABOVE: (Left to right) Mark Fox, Alan Murdie and Rob Gandy.

and finished with 'Highway Harbingers'; three completely different sets of strange circumstances which arguably prevented serious, potentially fatal, accidents (to be detailed in a future issue of FT).

Mark delivered a fascinating talk about the under-researched topic of how scents and smells can feature in paranormal encounters. He referred to Joshua Cutchin's *The Brimstone Deceit* (FT350:30-37) and the archive of the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre (RERC) in Lampeter.⁴ He began with a startling story of a mother who smelled smoke whilst in a cinema, causing her to rush home six miles across London with her husband, just in time to save their baby and the babysitter from a fire. Mark covered a wide range of related situations that included after-death communications, knowledge 'at a distance', premonitions, shared scents and burning. The vast majority of experiences were deemed positive, and included scents of flowers such as roses, violets, and jonquils; incense; pine trees; sweet smells; and even a deceased mother's perfume. However, there was a minority with negative connotations: the smell of death; putrid flesh; burning; and sulphur. The audience was intrigued by the point that Mark emphasised about sulphur not actually having any smell; it only has a

smell as a compound such as sulphur dioxide or hydrogen sulphide. Therefore, when people say that they smelled 'sulphur', often in the context of a UFO experience, we have to ask: what is causing this?

After lunch, Alan gave a talk about 'White Lady Apparitions', setting out how he had updated Andrew Green's classic 1977 *Phantom Ladies* book on the subject (FT450:30-35). He highlighted that the phenomena were ubiquitous and described how people often tried to account for such ghostly manifestations by invoking the name of a famous or notorious previous resident of, or visitor to, the supposedly haunted property. Nevertheless, not all phantom ladies are white: they also come in shades of grey, blue, green, red, pink and yellow! Alan described how Green's personal experience at the 'House of Suicides' in Montpelier Road, Ealing (FT342:30-35), together with some strange personal coincidences relating to the house, led him to believe that many related claims were folkloric in origin. But one important and perplexing question was why were so many of these female phantoms faceless? The story of the Low Valley Arms (in Wombwell, near Barnsley) – where the landlord investigating what he thought was a burglary was shocked to see a woman with silvery grey hair and a white gown, but no

face – was particularly chilling. Alan touched on the contentious speculations of Robert Graves about the 'White Goddess', and wondered to what degree the writer's tongue was in his cheek, particularly in light of Graves's personal life.

The event concluded with all three presenters having a panel discussion covering a wide range of topics. These included the commercialisation of ghosts and ghost-hunting, with many groups offering ghost tours and overnight stays in allegedly haunted houses or screening their own shows on YouTube. The validity of much of this (and what is reported in the media) was questionable. It was agreed that 'ghosts' were not one single phenomenon, but perhaps involved a whole variety of causes. Might some be thoughtforms, whose creators have forgotten their controlling word, wandering the world and wondering what is going on?

The event was a great success and the Society's 2025 conference, which will celebrate its 60th anniversary, will be held on Saturday 13 September 2025 in The Nightingale Centre, Great Hucklow, Derbyshire. This is deep in the beautiful Peak District and not too far from the historic plague village of Eyam. Speakers have yet to be determined, but an excellent line-up can be readily anticipated. Keep an eye on the USPS website for details, or contact David Taylor directly.

REFERENCES

¹ For more information about the society see: <https://unitarianpsychical.org.uk/>

² The other two are the Churches Fellowship for Psychical & Spiritual Studies and the Quaker Fellowship for Afterlife Studies.

³ These archives are held by David Taylor. Anyone wishing to enquire about them should contact David directly. He can be contacted via info@usps@yahoo.co.uk 85, p.22.

⁴ The Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre (RERC), University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Lampeter: <https://www.studyspiritualexperiences.org/news/merc-archive-online>



FT readers help **KARL SHUKER** solve a tongue-twisting crypto-conundrum at long last...

TWO-TONGUES IDENTIFIED?

A year ago, in this column (**FT440:20**), I introduced readers to a cryptozoological conundrum that had been puzzling me since the 1990s and which dated back a further six decades to a news report in the periodical *Modern Wonder*. The report, dated 27 May 1939, claimed that some mysterious beasts had been captured by a photographer in the jungles of Malaya (now Malaysia) and had been shown to officials in Manila, capital of the Philippines, but that no-one had been able to identify them. They were each said to be quadrupedal and to weigh approximately 200lb (90kg), to possess a raccoon-like head (masked?), a furry mole-like pelage (dense and dark?), a pair of owl-like eyes (very large and indicating a nocturnal lifestyle?), an odd dentition combining human-like teeth with cat-like teeth, a fondness for bananas, and – by far their most bizarre feature – each animal possessed two tongues! I speculated that were it not for their substantial weight and, needless to say, extraordinary twin-tongued condition, these cryptids might conceivably have been Malaysian tarsiers, as these very small and single-tongued but goblin-like creatures always arouse curiosity from observers unfamiliar with them.

Now, at long last, I have received a suggestion, made by two different readers independently of each other, that may finally have solved this wildlife riddle. One reader gave his name as Lars Dietz, the other chose to remain anonymous, but both brought to my attention in December 2024 the fascinating fact that lorises – those big-eyed, nocturnal, densely-furred, fruit-eating, Asian relatives of Africa's pottos and bushbabies, as well as Madagascar's lemurs – possess a veritable second tongue, the sublingua. Consisting of a relatively large, muscular tongue-like structure positioned beneath the primary tongue, and also possessed by the lorises' above-named African and Madagascan relatives and by the tarsiers too, it lacks taste buds, its function instead being to keep clean another dental characteristic of such creatures, the toothcomb, which is used in oral grooming. Outwardly, however, the sublingua does look like a second genuine tongue.

Consequently, it is easy to understand how a loris – or a tarsier – may have been described as a two-tongued creature by anyone with no previous experience of it. Having said that: as lorises and tarsiers exist in the Philippines as well as in Malaysia, it



LEFT: Slender Loris with both tongue and sublingua clearly visible. **BELOW:** California ground squirrel snacking on a vole.

seems strange that they would not have been recognised by officials there. Also, there is the matter of the two-tongues' claimed weight of 200lb to explain, which is far greater than that of lorises and tarsiers – unless the report had been garbled during its documentation in *Modern Wonder*, with the animals' true weight having been 200g, not 200lb. This would compare well with that of lorises and also that of the heaviest tarsiers. In view of the sublingua's evident anatomical relevance to this crypto-case, I feel that some such confusion between the metric and imperial systems may well have occurred, obscuring the true taxonomic identity of the two-tongues as either lorises or tarsiers. Moreover, perhaps the officials who saw these creatures simply weren't well-versed in their country's native fauna anyway. It certainly wouldn't be the first time! My thanks to those two readers for steering me in what I feel sure is the right direction in resolving this curious cryptozoological puzzle after almost a century. <https://karlshuker.blogspot.com/2024/12/tongue-tied-by-two-tongues.html>, 11 Dec 2024.

FLESH-EATING SQUIRRELS!

It might sound like the stuff of nightmares – or B-movie horror fare. Nevertheless, in June and July 2024, during a long-term ongoing study of rodent behaviour that involved the videoing of a population of California ground squirrels *Otospermophilus beecheyi* at Briones Regional Park in Contra Costa County, California, researchers from the Universities of California and Wisconsin-Eau Claire were shocked to observe that out of 74 filmed interactions between these squirrels and a much smaller rodent species, the California vole *Microtus c.*

californicus, 42 per cent of them featured squirrels actively attacking, killing, and consuming the flesh of the voles. Moreover, these attacks involved a number of different squirrel individuals, and of both sexes, so it wasn't a case of a few aberrant specimens,

or only specimens of one particular sex, being responsible. No such behaviour had even been previously suspected, let alone filmed; this squirrel is normally a granivorous (grain-eating) species. True, infanticide is not uncommon with it, and also the stomach contents of various dead squirrels examined in the past had occasionally included the remains of small vertebrates. As squirrels had not actually been seen preying upon such creatures, however, these latter findings had been explained away as the result of scavenging, the squirrels having opportunistically eaten meat from the carcasses of already-dead vertebrates they had encountered. Now, conversely, these researchers' video footage constitutes unequivocal proof that at least in this particular squirrel species, the active hunting, killing, and flesh consumption of vertebrate prey victims occurs – thereby adding California ground squirrels to the list of unexpected mammalian predators that also includes examples of carnivorous deer, sheep, horses, giraffes, and allegedly even one such elephant. www.discoverwildlife.com/animal-facts/mammals/carnivorous-squirrels-shocking-new-footage, 20 Dec 2024; <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10164-024-00832-6>, 18 Dec 2024.



THE C NSPIRASPHERE

It comes as no great surprise that the apocalyptic fires in Los Angeles generated conspiracy theories, but what, asks **NOEL ROONEY**, has the great Tartarian mud flood got to do with it all?

LOST EMPIRES

'Some say the world will end in fire.' It was a curious, not to say apocalyptic, introduction to the Orange Age 2.0. Wildfires in the Orange County destroyed large portions of Los Angeles, killed around 30 people, and sparked an equally apocalyptic outbreak of conspiracy theories. Behind the legacy media clatter — DEI firefighters, funding cuts, forest mismanagement, homeless celebrities — darker rumours surfaced.

The lack of equipment, water to fight the fires with, empty hydrants, the empty reservoir and fire trucks in the repair shop; these are the signs, if one has the eyes to see them, of a deliberate strategy of ethnic cleansing, even depopulation. Why, one might ask, would TPTB want to kill off a significant number of Angelinos? Why, to clear the ground for the 2028 Olympic Games, if the rabbit hole is short and straight. If it's sufficiently labyrinthine, then it was clearly to pave the way for the smart city of angels (or stay at home prison if that's your view; and in a fire zone too).

And in case you thought that nature had changed sides and was now working for the Blob, it was clear to some that the fires were not the normal expression of a 20-million-year-old ecosystem (though one might be tempted to ask why we persist in building cities in a fire forest) but the outcome of weaponised weather. After all, the Santa Ana winds do not normally blow at this time of year (well, except for 1961, perhaps, when there was an equally catastrophic fire).

So HAARP made the wind blow and nature did the rest? Not quite. The nature of the fire, and the often strange nature of the damage, suggested otherwise. Trees, a 'forensic arborist' told us, had burned from the inside.



Stories emerged of arson, but carried their own strangeness

And just like the Maui fire (**FT436:22**), blue things appeared immune to the flames (this has condensed into a theory that there is a patented energy weapon designed to avoid blue targets; it's, unsurprisingly, more popular in red states); as did plastic, apparently, and wooden structures. Photos and videos appeared of cars immolated, occasionally melted, under pristine trees, leaves glowing with health rather than flames.

What else could have caused such eccentrically targeted burning? Well, smart meters for one. This evidence was corroborated by the suggestion that new houses burned more often and more fiercely than old ones; which makes one wonder if smart cities are really a good idea. Whether Californian trees are fitted with such mod cons I was unable to verify, but if they were it appears they didn't work.

Stories emerged of arson everywhere (it is the case that most American forest fires are started deliberately), but they carried their own strangeness. A man cycling around with a lit blowtorch and a can of accelerant, torching discarded

Christmas trees, was apprehended by concerned citizens, who handed him over to the police. He was released the following day as they had no probable

cause to hold him. That didn't go down too well with folk who felt they were already on their own.

Perhaps the strangest aspect of the veritable tsunami of high strangeness that accompanied the disaster, for this writer at least, is how a theory that, on the face of it, has little to do with burning buildings in California managed to insinuate itself into the conspiracist mainstream at this point. How does the lost empire of Tartaria (see **FT415:27, 446:8-9**), and the great mud flood, connect with LA in 2025?

For those unfamiliar with this eldritch outlier, even for the C-sphere (the way it is gaining traction suggests you won't be for long), a brief primer: Mediaeval geographers, and indeed cartographers until well into the 18th century, occasionally referred to a territory called Tartaria, or the Great Tartary. This vast, vague tract of land encompassed more or less everything east of the Urals, including Siberia and Mongolia. It dwarfed China and India.

Actually, it did rather more than that. But to understand the true extent of this empire, it is necessary to incorporate the great mud flood. If you search this term online you will see photos and videos of buildings, from all around the globe, in the aftermath of said mud flood; invariably, the cellars of those buildings are now exposed to the world. And

if you look closely you will note that many of those cellars appear to have doors and windows leading to the outside world.

Why would an underground room need a front door? Why indeed. Well, the answer lies in the frozen wastes of Tartaria. That empire was once global in reach, and way more advanced than any other civilisation. Their buildings can be seen wherever mud floods have liberated them from chthonic obscurity. That is to say, most of the great edifices of western civilisation are, in fact, merely penthouses perched atop the architectural splendour of Tartaria.

Tartaria, so legend has it, is the source of the river of the dead, and the sinister Tatars are its boatmen; it is their privilege to announce the end of the world. Or Genghis Khan was its original overlord. Or it was inhabited by the Hyperboreans (blimey, do they mean us?) or the survivors of Atlantis, or the lost tribes of Israel. I am still trying to understand how podcasts on the fires segue seamlessly into talk of Tartary (occasionally after a brief excursion into smart meters) when mud appeared a frankly scarce commodity (ah, the empty hydrants again) in unfortunate LA.

So the Donald may have more on his welcome back plate than ski resorts in Greenland and seafront properties in Gaza. Fire, ice or mud? Nukes are by no means the only world-ending option.

<https://vtforeignpolicy.com/2025/01/los-angeles-hellfire-plots-clues-houses-gone-but-trees-still-standing-forensic-arborists-suspicious-video/> ; <https://strangesounds.substack.com/p/la-fires-vintage-vs-modern>; www.newstarget.com/2025-01-21-la-maui-infernos-patented-energy-weapon.html

FORTEAN FOLLOW-UPS

The latest updates on the Turin Shroud and DB Cooper, plus SHC revised as likely crinoline fire

CRINOLINE INFERNO [FT452:46-50]



The date of the last known crinoline fire death was given as 1933, but *Fortean Times* founder

Bob Rickard has flagged up a likely later death, from 1938. This is the case of Phyllis Newcombe, 22, who died after bursting into flames at a dance in Chelmsford, Essex. This is usually considered a case of spontaneous human combustion (SHC) and features in almost all the major books on the subject. However, at the dance in question, Newcombe was described as wearing a “dance dress in the old crinoline style” and reports of her becoming suddenly “enveloped in flames” recall those of known crinoline fires. During her inquest there was some consideration of how Newcombe’s dress could have ignited. Witnesses said no one was near her when she caught fire and no cigarette butts were found in her vicinity, while tests on the material from which her dress was made showed that while it lit readily from a flame, it did not light from a cigarette. The tests, though, were done with an isolated fabric swatch which would not have had the benefit of the chimney effect crinolines created, and any cigarette butts could have been consumed in the fire. As a result, it looks likely that Newcombe needs to be reclassified as a crinoline victim rather than an SHC case. *The Nottingham Journal*, 20 Sept 1938.

TURIN SHROUD [FT450:4-5]



Following publications from several research projects concluding that the Turin Shroud did originate in the Holy Land in biblical times and did once cover an injured corpse, inevitably there comes



one that concludes the opposite. Cicero Moraes, a digital graphics expert from Brazil, with experience of forensically recreating the faces of historical figures from their skulls, turned his attention to the Shroud to see if it could have been created by contact with a human body. He digitally created a virtual fabric to simulate the image that would be imprinted if it were draped over a corpse, and found that when laid flat it showed “a distorted and significantly more robust image than that on the shroud, as a result of the change from 3D to 2D”. He went on to explain that “roughly speaking, what we see as a result of printing stains from a human body would be a more swollen and distorted version of it, not an image that looks like a photocopy”. Instead, he believes that the image was created by draping the Shroud fabric over a carved bas-relief represent-

ing Jesus’s body, explaining that “a bas-relief, however, wouldn’t cause the image to deform, resulting in a figure that resembles a photocopy of the body.” As to whether the real Shroud could have resulted from contact with Jesus’s body, Moraes said, “I think the possibility of this having happened is very remote.” *dailystar.co.uk*, 30 Oct 2024.

HUNGA TONGA-HUNGA HA’APAI VOLCANO [FT416:4]



The eruption of Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha’apai, an underwater volcano off Tonga in the South Pacific, in January 2022, was the most powerful explosion ever recorded by modern instruments, with effects felt all round the world. After modest beginnings, on 15 January 2022 the volcano

blew its top, hitting a Volcanic Explosivity Index (VEI) rating of VEI-5, making it one of the most explosive eruptions known, equivalent to hundreds of atomic bombs and on a par with the AD 79 Vesuvius eruption that entombed Pompeii. Later analysis of data from around the world showed that it had also generated the fastest underwater currents ever recorded. Now, a study of the eruption published in the journal *Geophysical Research Letters* has shown that the volcano produced signs that a massive eruption was imminent up to 15 minutes before it happened. According to co-author Mie Ichihara, a volcanologist at the University of Tokyo, analysis of seismic data recorded on instruments in Fiji and Futuna about 750km (466 miles) away from Tonga showed that the volcano generated a large Rayleigh wave 15 minutes before the eruption. Rayleigh waves are a type of acoustic wave that move across the Earth’s surface. These are generated by seismic activity but can only be detected by instruments. Eruptions and earthquakes are notoriously hard to predict but, says Ichihara, “Early warnings are very important for disaster mitigation. Island volcanoes can generate tsunamis, which are a significant hazard,” so even getting 15 minutes notice of an impending eruption could be vital. “Many eruptions are preceded by seismic activity,” he adds. “At the time of the eruption, we didn’t think of using this kind of analysis in real-time, but maybe the next time that there is a significant eruption underwater, local observatories can recognise it from their data.” *Sciencealert.com*, 19 Nov 2024.

DB COOPER FOUND? [FT444:27]



The case for the true identity of legendary skyjacker DB Cooper being Richard McCoy Jr appears to have been strengthened by a parachute handed over to the FBI by an investigator. The man now known as DB Cooper high-jacked a plane in the US in 1971, released its passengers in return for a ransom and two parachutes, then forced the crew to fly him to Mexico, only to jump from the plane with the money somewhere over the wilderness of Washington State, never to be seen again. While many believe he died there, other think he survived, and a cottage industry of researchers known as the “Cooper Vortex”, intent on discovering his identity, has since grown up. A prime suspect is McCoy, who committed an almost identical crime shortly after Cooper’s, surviving his jump only to be arrested a few days later. He subsequently died in a shootout with police after escaping prison. McCoy’s children, Chanté and Richard III (Rick), certainly believe their father was Cooper.

Now, amateur Cooper sleuth and YouTuber Dan Gryder claims he has found a modified parachute matching the one used by “Cooper” in a storage shed at a property in North Carolina



owned by McCoy’s mother and has handed it over to the FBI. The parachutes given to Cooper were modified in a specific and known way by expert skydiver Earl Cossey, and Gryder claims the McCoy parachute has these identical modifications. “This,” Gryder said, “will definitely prove it was McCoy,” adding, “That rig is literally one in a billion.” He alleges that after he gave them the parachute, the FBI searched the property for four hours and took away other material. The FBI hasn’t commented on the find, though; they officially closed the case as “unsolved” in 2016, although they said that “should specific physical evidence emerge – related specifically to the parachutes or the money taken by the hijacker – individuals with those materials are asked to contact their local FBI field office.” Gryder claims that the FBI investigators told him a possible next step would be to exhume McCoy’s body and attempt to get a DNA match with evidence left behind. Another Cooper aficionado and YouTuber Ryan Burns, though, is critical of Gryder and his revelations, and points out that Gryder’s find appears to be a modified Airforce parachute, while records show that Cooper was given Navy chutes. *popularmechanics.com*, 25 Nov; *Independent.co.uk*, *thedebrief.org*, 28 Nov 2024.



TOP: Richard Floyd McCoy Jr. **ABOVE:** Dan Gryder holding a parachute found in a property connected to McCoy; he believes it matches the one used by DB Cooper.

MYTHCONCEPTIONS

by Mat Coward

288: SPIRAL STAIRCASES



The myth

Spiral staircases in castles always turn clockwise. This is to make it difficult for a presumably right-handed invader to fight his way up the stairs, as his sword arm is hampered by the pillar.

The “truth”

The first bit is easily dealt with: they don’t all spiral in a clockwise direction. Work by the University of Chester found that around 30 per cent of surviving examples turn anticlockwise. Some castles have both. As for fighting on the stairs, military historians argue that it would be bloody difficult whether you were going up or down, and that in any case it was unlikely to happen. If the attacker is at the bottom of your stairs, you’ve already lost the battle. Fighting inside castles was extremely rare throughout their active history; it’s more likely that right or left spirals were chosen for aesthetic, architectural or housekeeping reasons. No piece of contemporary evidence has ever been found to support the myth, while buildings archaeologist James Wright may have found its source: a 1902 essay by Sir Theodore Cook, art critic – and sword-fighting obsessive.

Sources

<https://fakehistoryhunter.net/2023/10/09/medieval-staircases-were-not-built-going-clockwise-for-the-defenders-advantage/>; *Historic Building Mythbusting* by James Wright (History Press, 2024); www.newcastlecastle.co.uk/castle-blog/spiral-stairs

Disclaimer

Defenders and attackers of the Swordsman Hypothesis get quite heated about this debate, even to the extent of dressing up in full armour and challenging each other to mortal combat (probably), so to be clear: we make no claims to provide final truths...

Mythchaser

May you live in interesting times,” says an FT reader, who points out that (like most ‘Chinese proverbs’) this popular saying is not actually Chinese. It is, he says, the bottom rung of an ascending trio of curses. Next up is “May you come to the attention of high authority”, and the nastiest of all is “May all your wishes come true”. What our reader wants to know, please, is can someone put a name to the author(s) of these witty lines?



NECROLOG

This month, we mourn the passing of a great director whose unique vision brought beauty, terror and a powerful sense of the strange to American cinema



DAVID LYNCH

Last October, David Lynch admitted that he was unlikely to make another film because years of smoking had given him emphysema. This meant he could not leave the house and needed supplementary oxygen even to walk across the room. He described it as “like you’re walking around with a plastic bag around your head”; unconsciously, perhaps, echoing the iconic image of the corpse of Laura Palmer wrapped in plastic from his best-known work, the TV series *Twin Peaks*. Living in the Hollywood Hills meant that Lynch’s home was at risk from the recent LA wildfires, so he was evacuated to his daughter’s house, but the stress of the move and the poor air quality caused him to take a turn for the worse, and he died there five days short of his 79th birthday.

After attending art school with the intention of becoming a painter, Lynch started his film career by making short semi-animated student films such as *Six Men Getting Sick* and *The Grandmother*. He came to prominence, though, with his first feature, 1977’s *Eraserhead*, a disorientingly strange story of a man with an unusual haircut attempting to care for a mutant

baby, distracted only by a tiny, swollen-cheeked singer living in his radiator. Unlike anything cinema had seen before, it took some time to make its mark, but eventually became a staple of late night cinema. Hard to categorise – almost horror, but not really; surreal, but not entirely; comic, but in a deeply disturbing way, and profoundly off-kilter in an inexplicable but coherent way – it marked Lynch out as a unique voice.

Lynch might have remained an underground director of cult curiosities had Mel Brooks not taken a chance on him and offered him the opportunity to direct a mainstream film. This was *The Elephant Man*, based on the true story of Joseph Merrick. Beautifully shot in a silvery black and white, it gave us a grimy and crepuscular 19th century London and a story that was by turns bizarre, sinister and heartbreaking, with a stellar performance from John Hurt in the lead role. This gave Lynch the first of his Oscars and seemingly set him up for a career in mainstream cinema. However, his next film fared less well. This was *Dune*, which was poorly received by critics and a massive flop in the cinema, where it appeared drastically cut in an edit made

without Lynch’s involvement. It did, though, give us Kyle MacLachlan, who was to become a stalwart of future Lynch productions.

Lynch was never given a big budget film again. This may have been a blessing in disguise as it meant he returned to making more personal films, starting with *Blue Velvet*, which established key elements of his style – seemingly wholesome communities with dark underbellies, femme fatales, lip synched songs, visceral ultraviolence, flickering fluorescent lights, corrupted innocence – and won him a second Oscar. JG Ballard described it as “the best film of the 1980s – surreal, voyeuristic, subversive”. *Wild at Heart*, with its raw and shattering car accidents, cemented Lynch’s reputation as a riveting film maker, so there was some surprise when in the early 1990s he turned to TV for his next project. Created with Mark Frost, previously known for gritty police procedural *Hill Street Blues*, *Twin Peaks* was set in an idyllic logging community in the American Northwest, full of charming and quirky characters like the Log Lady, but where prom queen Laura Palmer had been bizarrely murdered and found on a local lakeshore wrapped in blue plastic. Kyle MacLachlan appeared as coffee and cherry pie obsessed FBI agent Dale Cooper, sent to investigate the crime, which he tackled using unconventional methods that relied on dreams and portents as much as deductive reasoning. He linked Palmer’s death to a hidden criminal underworld and an ancient supernatural evil that brought forth the eldritch horror “Killer Bob”, the sinister Black Lodge, whose inhabitants spoke in reverse, and owls that were not what they seemed.

Twin Peaks turned out to be a huge international hit, despite

leaning into unexplained and uncompromising weirdness, and “Who killed Laura Palmer?” became an international obsession. This led to a second series, but after network pressure made Lynch and Frost reveal the killer mid-series, interest waned, and it took until 2017 for a third series to be made; but this was a stunning and uncompromising Lynchian masterpiece that made the wait worthwhile. The influence of *Twin Peaks* was huge; without it there would have been no *Sopranos* and no *Breaking Bad*, but it also led to *The X-Files* – David Duchovny had appeared as an FBI agent in *Twin Peaks* before playing Fox Mulder.

Following the dark prequel *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me*, Lynch’s films, *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* became increasingly baffling and non-linear, but remained must-see cinema, with *Mulholland Drive* winning Lynch his third Oscar. They consolidated his reputation as a unique and masterly film maker, even as he refused to explain or even hint at their meanings, saying: “I don’t know why people expect art to make sense when they accept the fact that life doesn’t make sense.” However, just as people thought they had Lynch pigeonholed, he confounded expectations by directing *The Straight Story*, a naturalistic linear narrative made for Disney and based on the true story of Alvin Straight, who drove 300 miles across America on a lawn tractor to visit his ailing brother. Gentle, emotionally perceptive and deeply moving, it leant into Lynch’s kindly and hopeful side. In truth, this could be seen in all his films, where love, hope and goodness are always sources of strength and cynicism is notable by its absence.

A major part of Lynch’s legacy is as the foremost filmmaker of the uncanny. He deals with



the unknown and potentially supernatural in a unique way, understanding like no one else the absolute ungovernable fear created by something going very wrong with reality. Lynch eschews the use of traditional supernatural elements and comes up with horrors entirely his own that stick in the mind and resurface in nightmares in the way that conventional jump-scare monsters never could. His work is genuinely frightening where other film makers just achieve scary, which, given that in person he was warm and avuncular with an old school “Aw, shucks” American charm, seems even more extraordinary.

Just as his horrors are darker than most, his characters’ emotions are rawer and more immediate. No one showed grief more wrenchingly than in the screaming, tear-spurting, snot-bubbling closeup of Mrs Palmer on learning of Laura’s death, or fear more vividly than when Laura catches sight of Killer Bob.

Lynch’s films alone make him an artist of the first rank, but these were just one string to his bow. He had a parallel career in music, making several solo albums and collaborating with a variety of other musicians, most famously Julee Cruise, but also Jocelyn Montgomery on a magnificent interpretation of Hildegard of Bingen’s music, and with his soundtrack collaborator Angelo Badalementi. He produced a long running cartoon strip, *The Angriest Dog in the World*, was an acclaimed painter, had two popular YouTube series where he gave daily LA weather reports and made lottery draws, and acted in his own and other people’s films. He made his last appearance in Stephen Spielberg’s recent *Meet the Fablemans* playing Hollywood legend John Ford; and David Lynch deserves a place in the cinematic pantheon every bit as much as Ford does.

David Keith Lynch, film director and cultural polymath; born Missoula, Montana, 20 Jan 1946; died Los Angeles, California, 15 Jan 2025, aged 78.



FAIRIES, FOLKLORE AND FORTEANA

SIMON YOUNG FILES A NEW REPORT FROM THE INTERFACE OF STRANGE PHENOMENA AND FOLK BELIEF

FADING AWAY

I want to introduce what I call the ‘Fade Encounter’, a modern vanishing trick. An example: a young man is walking through the morning fog in California in the 1980s. Suddenly, through the murk, he sees a woman step out onto the path. She smiles and says “Hello”, followed by his name. He stands awestruck – he has never seen her before (and will never see her again). Then she walks past and after five steps she simply isn’t there anymore.

The fade encounter depends on: i) a human-looking supernatural being; and ii) their sudden disappearance, which confirms supernatural status. The pattern repeats with remarkable consistency in the Fairy Census (where I’ve taken my examples from). In the 2020s, a man investigating ‘Bigfoot structures’ in a wood (in County Cavan!?) meets a precisely-dressed young woman, about 4ft10in (147cm) tall, wearing glasses. She looks daggers at him. When he follows her around a corner, she has vanished.

A weirder one (be patient). In Ohio (2020s), a woman sees what appears to be a perfectly ordinary young man ahead of her in the street. Being sensibly cautious, she crosses the road. When she looks again, where the man had been standing there is now a black cat with a white bib, staring at her with unnervingly intelligent eyes. In Massachusetts in the 2000s

a woman goes riding. She sees “a slim, young man with long blonde hair leaning against a tree”. She looks around to see whether they are alone and when she looks back he has gone.

This ambiguity marks a shift from earlier supernatural encounters. In the 19th century, there was rarely any doubt that what was seen was supernatural. Fairies were in Britain, at least, small and dressed in distinctive colours. Ghosts floated and had bad breath. The ‘Fade Encounter’ begins mundanely: someone walking nearby... then, they fade to black.

For me the satisfaction in these stories comes from that ambiguity. These ‘beings’ might just, after all, be people. Their disappearance can perhaps be explained. Maybe the young woman in California vanished not into thin air but into the fog; but let’s forget the problem of how she knew the young man’s name. The young woman in the wood in Ireland may have been scared by the man and have hidden behind a tree. The woman in Ohio – herself anxious about being alone in the evening – might have thought she saw a man when it was just a shadow.

What is certain is that this type of story is establishing itself. From what I know, it is a post-war phenomenon. Where does it come from? Where will it go?

Simon Young is the editor of *The Cottingley Fairy Photographs: New Approaches to Fairies, Fakes and Folklore*.

THE WOMAN
LOOKS DAGGERS
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VANISHED



Reviews and predictions

NIGEL WATSON looks at reviews of 2024's UFO landscape and new initiatives for the future

UFO REVIEWS

2024 was a busy year for UFO reports and investigations. Both the Center for UFO Studies (CUFOS) and blogger Jason Colavito have published month-by-month reviews of the main UFO events of the year. Colavito calls it a "dull slog" and concentrates on US activities and alien-related documentaries, while the CUFOS review by George M Eberhart is a more detailed look at worldwide cases and initiatives. The latter references a proposal for EU-level action to study UAPs submitted by representatives of European civilian UAP organisations. As they think "UAP represent a complex and multi- and transdisciplinary phenomenon that demands our immediate attention and action." It urges Members of the European Parliament to:

1. Establish an EU process for collection of UAP data, access, analysis and publication.
2. Include UAP in EU priorities, actions and legislation (e.g. on security, aviation and space).
3. Establish priorities and provide funding for EU research on UAP.
4. Exchange information on UAP with other countries.

It goes on to explain that UAP show characteristics that are unique and inexplicable because of the Five Observables, namely:

1. Positive Lift.
2. Instantaneous Acceleration.
3. Hypersonic Velocity (Without Signatures).
4. Trans-Medium Travel.
5. Low Observability.

These are mere assumptions and mainly rely on unreliable eyewitness testimony, accounts given by "whistleblowers" and supported by rather dodgy videos. One also questions why craft that have low observability and the ability to travel soundlessly at extraordinary fast speeds with instantaneous acceleration, are seen so often... Missing from that list is a sixth observable: they crash a lot! cufos.org/2024review/; www.jasoncolavito.com/blog/a-dull-slog-2024-in-review/; www.uapcheck.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/UAP-at-EU-level-a-proposal-for-action-24Oct.pdf

PREDICTIONS

French ufologist Michael Vaillant thinks that none of the current hypotheses regarding mystery drone sightings are completely adequate, because: "Their behaviour appears deliberate, almost 'theatrical,' with intentional visibility through navigation lights. This display contrasts sharply with expectations for military or spy drones, which would normally seek to

remain discreet." It is Vaillant's contention that these patterns of calculated displays are "gradually accustoming humanity to the presence of something beyond our current understanding and potentially culminating around 2035."

Martin Kottmeyer observes on his Facebook page that Vaillant seems to be influenced by Jacques Vallee's "Control System Theory", which regards UAP/UFO/alien phenomena as being some form of intelligence that has been manipulating humanity since the dawn of time. And that Vaillant's 2035 prediction is a familiar retreading of previous failed notions of disclosure and revelation.

On that note, ufologist Dr Steven Greer claims the drone displays of 2024 were conducted by terrestrial secret US black ops teams using alien technology. He boldly predicted at the beginning of January 2025 that: "Coming forward in the next 30 days or so, they will bring forth positive evidence of this and the fact that these programs have been run illegally and outside of constitutional oversight."

Matthew Szydagis, Associate Professor, Department of Physics at the State University of New York at Albany joins the prediction game in his essay "How much time do we have before catastrophic disclosure occurs?" In this he studies simulations of different scenarios, of varying degrees of pessimism and optimism, and makes three basic assumptions:

1. NHI (non-human intelligence) – or, a very advanced yet unknown group of humans possessing extraordinary vehicles – may actually exist.
 2. Regardless of point of origin or motivations: they possess high-tech craft they operate on/near Earth's surface.
 3. They are neither supernatural nor infallible, making accidents such as unplanned (i.e., crash) landings possible.
- Given these factors, if they are real craft, according to Szydagis a catastrophic disclosure could happen at any time or at least between 2040 and 2060. www.uapcheck.com/news/id/2952/shadows-in-the-sky-unidentified-drones-and-the-new-jersey-mystery/; arxiv.org/html/2410.12738v2#S4

OUT OF AFRICA

The UAP Africa website provides a breakdown of 276 documented cases across 38 African countries, dating back to 1950. It notes that there were notable waves in 1954, the 1970s and the 2000s onwards. The author of the report, Tristan Routier, claims: "These peaks of activity often seem to be correlated

with social, technological or cultural events that influence the way in which phenomena are perceived and documented." 60% of cases involved lights; 30% structured craft that were disc, cigar or triangle shaped; 10% close encounters involving humanoids near structured or luminous craft that witnesses sometimes linked to their spiritual or supernatural beliefs rather than to alien ships. Like the European report, it suggests the need for better data collection and cooperation to support interdisciplinary projects. By those means it concludes: "Africa, through its history, diversity and intellectual resources, has a central role to play in this collective approach aimed at better understanding these fascinating phenomena." uapafrique.com/2025/01/05/rapport-danalyse-sur-les-observations-dovni-en-afrique

SKY CANADA PROJECT

The Office of the Chief Science Advisor for Canada (OCSA), is conducting a Sky Canada Project. Their website states that: "Our goal was to find the current resources and processes in place for handling and following up on UAP reports, to compare them with the best practices in other countries, and to make recommendations for potential improvements. Accordingly, this report focuses on the services available to the Canadian public for reporting UAPs, and not on the UAPs themselves; understanding this distinction is critical to reading the report. The Sky Canada Project is not about investigating what UAPs are. It is about science informing and serving everyone: "The study explores the current reporting landscape, identifies gaps, and provides recommendations to enhance transparency and scientific inquiry on UAP issues in Canada." In a preview to a report they will be releasing later in 2025, the project found that 71% of Canadians did not know what caused UAP sightings, with only 10% thinking they might be of an alien origin. 27% of the respondents said they had viewed a UAP, but only 9% actually tried to report their observation. In a long list of recommendations, it suggests an agency should be set up to collect and investigate UAP sightings and there should be better cooperation and transparency between the government, academics, media and the general population.

All of these projects and many other new UAP projects have great aspirations, but as with the UFO research of the past, it is not guaranteed they will successfully achieve their goals. ised-isde.canada.ca/site/science/en/office-chief-science-advisor/sky-canada-project



Transatlantic ufology

JENNY RANGLES looks back at a pivotal four-week trip that changed her views about UFOs

In November 1983 I flew to the USA for the first time, with fellow researcher and co-author Dot Street; it was a trip we were able to take thanks to the advance on a book about the Rendlesham incident that Dot, Brenda Butler and I had signed a contract to write (it would be published as *Sky Crash* in 1984). It was also our first opportunity for a glimpse of ufology outside Britain, and my diaries of the four weeks we spent in the US record the contrast between the US and UK UFO scenes of the time.

Disturbingly, the in-flight movie turned out to be *War Games*, which got us thinking how the events in Rendlesham – an airbase that was home to secret nuclear weapons – had left people feeling ‘under attack’ from unknown forces and could have easily escalated into a global catastrophe.

Arriving at Chicago O’Hare we were met by Mimi Hynek, the wife of J Allen Hynek and one of the ‘first ladies’ of ufology, who was waiting to drive us to Evanston where she and Allen lived. On arrival, we were greeted by Allen and invited to have dinner with Karl Henize of NASA, who was curious to hear about Rendlesham and to tell us of his planned trip on the Space Shuttle; he flew safely on *Challenger* two years later. I was intrigued by Karl’s account of working in Capcom during earlier space missions and noting odd things that crews sometimes spotted. I was struck by his observation that in space, with no spatial context such as we get on Earth due to topography, it was easy to misperceive a small object close by as a large one far away: there was no atmosphere to impact visibility and no way to correctly gauge distance or size. I’d been becoming increasingly aware in my investigations that misperception of the ordinary for the remarkable was the most common contributor to most UFO cases, so hearing of space-born misperceptions of objects illuminated my future approach; I would not presume that an otherwise credible witness was accurately describing the size of an object or how far away it was. Astronauts build up that kind of judgement out of necessity; for UFO witnesses, what they see is usually a one-off event.

The next day, Allen showed us the 40-inch telescope at Northwestern University and we talked about the Spielberg movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, based in part on Allen’s pioneering book *The UFO Experience*, and his brief appearance in the film.

On the third day Mimi, Allen, Dot and I



Why was the UFO mystery expanding into such curious asides as leaving circles in a field?

took a 13-hour drive to Nebraska for a UFO conference where we met some of the leading US researchers, including Linda Moulton Howe. Linda was encountering reports of animal mutilations from the farms and ranches of the Midwest, and these were being linked to UFO encounters.

This was intriguing for us – a novel aspect of ufology unique to the US; in the UK, we had crop circles rather than dead cattle in the fields, and these too were quickly linked to UFOs. This left me suspecting we were caught in a sort of cultural trap: because UFOs were by then the go-to mystery across the world, any ‘new’ phenomenon was automatically linked to putative aliens.

I was starting to suspect crop circles were largely hoaxes, but listened with fascination to the mutilation reports. Linda was clearly a good investigator with real concerns about the environment, but I was wondering if our human fascination with patterns was creating links between disparate phenomena that were not necessarily there in the evidence. Why, I asked myself, was the UFO mystery expanding into such curious asides as leaving circles in a field. This is when I began to become wary of ‘evidence creep’ and a growing tendency to assimilate to the UFO mystery material beyond the reasonable boundaries of the subject. So the Nevada conference was a key moment for me, one that shifted me unexpectedly in a more rational direction.

It was also my first hearing of the evidence Budd Hopkins was finding based on the use of regression hypnosis. In the past couple of years this had been used on a UK witness, Alan Godfrey, who had

LEFT: Jenny Randles and Dot Steet heading West on a flight from Heathrow to Chicago in 1983.

encountered a UFO in his police car just four weeks before Rendlesham. I could see that stories of alien abduction via hypnosis were fascinating – but how real were they? It felt more like dreaming around a theme.

I had sat next to Alan Godfrey as he said what he had seen under hypnosis. The mix of wonder, puzzlement and absurdity seemed almost surreal and had me wondering where memory ended and imagination perceived as reality began.

Of course, Dot and I talked about Rendlesham, but rumours were spreading round the conference that CIA agents were there listening in to what we knew!

What I did pick up from mingling with delegates was a suggestion that the Rendlesham events were not just down to a misidentified lighthouse. It was a powerful theory that never rang entirely true, as locals were just as puzzled as USAF officers, even though they had lived alongside the lighthouse for years. But did that mean that witnesses really had seen an alien craft?

A self-declared USAF intelligence officer at the conference asked me to consider that the whole thing might have been a simulated exercise to see how the base would react to an Earth-based (rather than ET) ‘invasion’. I was told by this person, who might not have been what he claimed to be, that it had been a coordinated fact-gathering operation in which most base personnel were not told what was happening because the aim was to see how airmen would react to such a situation in real life and how successfully an enemy might scare and unsettle defending troops via such a ruse. Perhaps...

While Dot flew east to chase up witnesses for our book, I went further west with Allen and Mimi, meeting Allen’s astronomer friend James Van Allen. He was intrigued by our Rendlesham investigation and we debated whether a Soviet satellite burning up on entry into the atmosphere might have started the series of events. We thought it was unlikely it could be so significantly misperceived, but it had to be considered.

There were other meetings with scientists at Boulder, where the infamous Condon report had ended, and with *FATE* editor Jerry Clarke on the shore of Lake Michigan, as well as meeting back up with Dot in Florida to see a space shuttle launch.

It is no exaggeration to say that month 42 years ago changed how I saw UFOs forever.

THE CLOSEST ENCOUNTER

THE PASCAGOULA ALIEN ABDUCTION

PHILIP MANTLE has spent years researching the 1973 alien encounter reported by Charles Hickson and Calvin Parker and argues that it remains one of the strongest UFO contact cases on record. Here, he reopens the Pascagoula files and presents his latest findings.

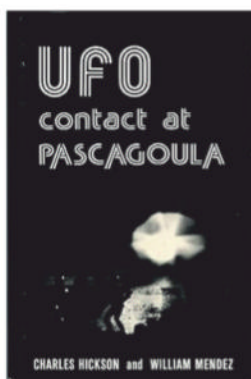
In 2015 I set up my own small one-man-band publishing outfit called Flying Disk Press. In 2017 I was able to re-publish a book that had originally been published in 1983 by Wendelle Stevens: *UFO Contact at Pascagoula* by Charles Hickson and William Mendez. Charles Hickson was one of the two men who had a close encounter experience at Pascagoula, Mississippi, in 1973 and William Mendez was an author and researcher. The other witness involved in this close encounter was Calvin Parker. Charles Hickson had died in 2011, so I had the idea of trying to locate Calvin Parker and perhaps asking for an interview which I could use in the re-published book. Eventually, I managed to track Calvin down and speak to him on the phone. To my great surprise, he was considering writing his own book. Little did I know what new information I was going to uncover about what now is considered by some as the best documented close encounter case on record. Before we look at some of this information I will outline a summary of the case.

THE ENCOUNTER: PASCAGOULA, MISSISSIPPI, 11 OCTOBER 1973

On the evening of 11 October 1973, 42-year-old Charles Hickson and 18-year-old Calvin Parker – co-workers at a shipyard – were fishing off a pier on the west bank of the Pascagoula River in Mississippi. They heard a whirring/whizzing sound, saw two flashing blue lights, and reported that an oval shaped “craft”, some 8ft (2.4m) across and 20ft (6m) high, suddenly appeared near them; it seemed to levitate about 2ft (60cm) above the ground. A door opened on the ship, they said, and three creatures emerged and seized the two men, floating or levitating them into the craft. Both men reported being paralysed and numb. Parker claimed that he had fainted due to fright. They described the creatures as being roughly humanoid in shape and standing about five feet (1.5m) tall. The creatures’ skin was grey in colour and wrinkled; they had no eyes that the men could make out, and slits for mouths. Their heads also appeared connected directly to their shoulders, with no discernible neck. There were three “carrot-like” growths



THE CREATURES’ SKIN WAS GREY IN COLOUR AND WRINKLED; THEY HAD NO EYES



the creatures’ lower bodies as looking as if their legs were fused together) ending in

instead – one where the nose would be on a human, the other two where ears would normally be. The beings had lobster-like claws at the ends of their arms and they seemed to have only one leg (Hickson later described

LEFT: Charles Hickson and Calvin Parker, whose story was told in the 1983 book *UFO Contact at Pascagoula*.

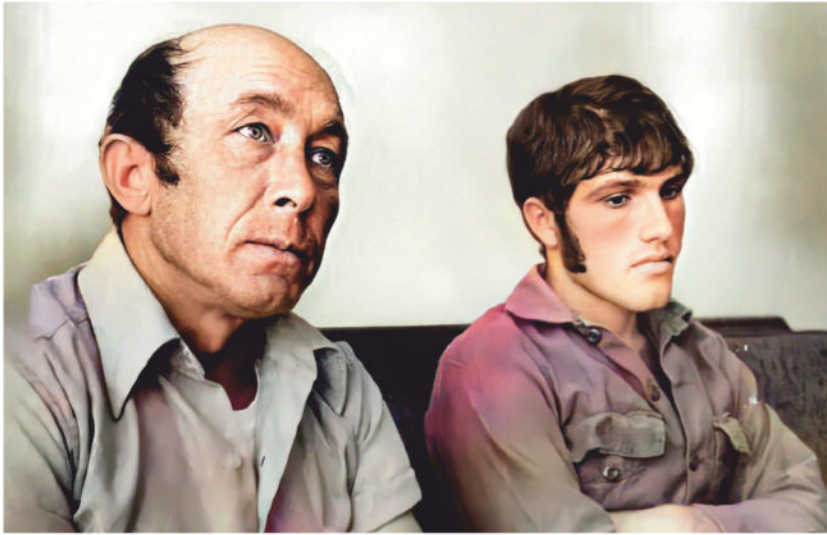
elephant-like feet. Hickson also reported that the creatures moved in a mechanical, robotic way.

On the ship, Hickson claimed that he was somehow levitated a few feet above the floor of the craft and was examined by what looked like a large football-shaped mechanical eye, about 6-8in (15-20cm) in diameter, that seemed to scan his body. Parker claimed that he could not recall what had happened to him inside the craft, although later, during sessions of hypnotic regression, he offered some hazy details. The men were released after about 15-30 minutes and the creatures levitated them, with Hickson’s feet dragging along the ground, back to their original positions on the river bank. Both men said they were terrified by what had happened. They claimed to have sat in their car for about 45 minutes, trying to calm themselves. Hickson drank a small amount of whiskey. After some discussion, they tried to report their story to officials at Keesler Air Force Base, but personnel told them the United States Air Force had nothing to do with UFO reports and suggested the men notify the police. At about 10.30pm, Hickson and Parker arrived at the Jackson County, Mississippi, Sheriff’s office. They brought the catfish they’d caught while fishing; it was the only proof they had to back up their story. Sheriff Fred Diamond thought the men seemed sincere and genuinely frightened and he thought Parker was especially disturbed. Diamond harboured some doubt about the fantastic story, however, due in part to Hickson’s admitted whiskey consumption. Seeing that the police were understandably somewhat sceptical of their story, Hickson and Parker offered to take lie detector tests to prove their honesty.

THE ‘SECRET TAPE’

After Sheriff Diamond had interviewed the men, putting them through repeated questioning, he left them alone in a room that was, unknown to Hickson or Parker, rigged





ABOVE LEFT: Charles Hickson and Calvin Parker photographed about two weeks after the incident. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Dr James Harder and Dr J Allen Hynek. **BELOW:** Sheriff Fred Diamond who questioned the two men immediately following their experience. **BOTTOM:** Artist's impression of one of the Pascagoula entities.

with a hidden microphone. Sheriff Diamond assumed that if they were lying, that fact would become immediately apparent when the two spoke privately. Instead, they continued to talk in voices that sounded terribly distressed. This so-called 'secret tape' was held on file at the Jackson County Sheriff's department and has since gained wider circulation among UFO researchers. Parker, who seemed particularly shaken, spoke repeatedly of his wish to see a doctor. A partial transcript of their interrogation and of the tape is available; here is part of the conversation, as transcribed by me.

Calvin Parker: I got to get home and get to bed or get some nerve pills or see the doctor or something. I can't stand it. I'm about to go half crazy.

Charlie Hickson: I tell you, when we're through, I'll get you something to settle you down so you can get some damn sleep.

Calvin: I can't sleep yet like it is. I'm just damn near crazy.

Charlie: Well, Calvin, when they brought you out... when they brought me out of that thing, goddamn it I like to never in Hell got you straightened out.

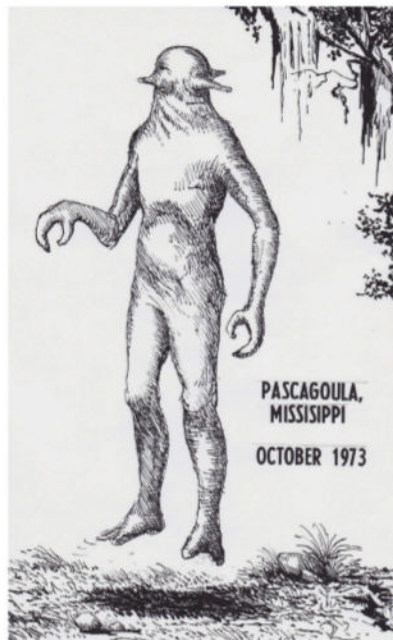
His voice rising, Calvin says, "My damn arms, my arms, I remember they just froze up and I couldn't move. Just like I stepped on a damn rattlesnake."
"They didn't do me that way," sighs Charlie.

Calvin: I passed out. I expect I never passed out in my whole life.

Charlie: I've never seen nothin' like that before in my life. You can't make people believe.

Calvin: I don't want to keep sittin' here. I want to see a doctor.

"THEY BETTER WAKE UP AND START BELIEVIN'... THEY BETTER START BELIEVIN'"



Charlie: They better wake up and start believin'... they better start believin'.

Calvin: You see how that damn door come right up?

Charlie: I don't know how it opened, son. I don't know.

Calvin: It just laid up and just like that those son bitches... just like that they come out.

Charlie: I know. You can't believe it. You can't make people believe it.

Calvin: I paralysed right then. I couldn't move.

Charlie: They won't believe it. They gonna believe it one of these days. Might be too late. I knew all along they was people from other worlds up there. I knew all along. I never thought it would happen to me.

Calvin: You know yourself I don't drink.

Charlie: I know that son. When I get to the house I'm gonna get me another drink, make me sleep. Look, what we sittin' around for. I gotta go tell Blanche... what we waitin' for?

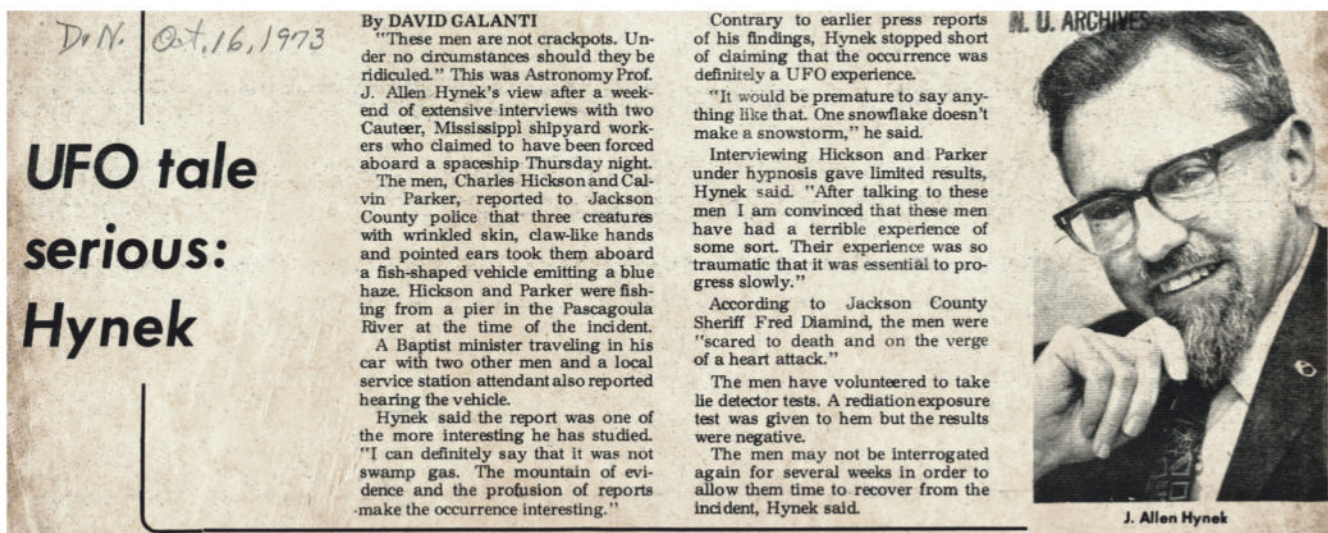
Calvin (sounding panicky): I gotta go to the house. I'm getting' sick. I gotta get out of here.

Then Charlie gets up and leaves the room, and Calvin is left alone.

Calvin: It's hard to believe... Oh God, it's awful... I know there's a God up there...

THE STORY BREAKS

Hickson and Parker returned to work the following day (Friday, 12 October). They did not initially discuss their purported UFO encounter, but co-workers noted that Parker seemed very anxious and preoccupied. Within hours, Sheriff Diamond telephoned



ABOVE: A contemporary newspaper report on Hynek's assessment of the Pascagoula incident. BELOW: The pier on the Pascagoula River in 1973, and Charles Hickson revisiting the scene of the two men's abduction experience.

the men at work, stating that news reporters were swarming in his office, seeking more information about the UFO. An angry Hickson accused Diamond of breaking his confidentiality pledge, but Diamond insisted he had not done so and that the case was too sensational to keep quiet.

Hickson's foreman overheard Hickson's side of the conversation and asked what had occurred. Hickson related his story to the foreman and to shipyard owner Johnny Walker. After hearing the tale, Walker suggested that Hickson and Parker contact Joe Colingo, a locally prominent attorney who was Walker's brother-in-law and also represented the shipyard. Colingo met the men and, during their conversation, Hickson expressed fears about having been exposed to radiation. Colingo and detective Tom Huntley then took Parker and Hickson to a local hospital, which lacked the facilities for a radiation test. From the hospital, the men went to Keesler Air Force Base, where they were examined extensively by several doctors. Afterwards, reported Huntley, Parker and Hickson were interviewed by the military intelligence chief of the base, with the "whole base command" observing the proceedings. (I have a full unredacted transcript of this meeting which is 17 pages long and was recorded by a stenographer at the base.)

Colingio drew up a contract to represent Hickson and Parker. However, nothing came of this, and Hickson would later have nothing to do with the attorney: Colingo, said Hickson, "just wanted to make a buck." Within days, Pascagoula was the centre of



an international news story, with reporters swarming the town. Dr James A Harder (a UC Berkeley engineering professor) and Dr J Allen Hynek (an astronomer formerly with Project Blue Book) both arrived and interviewed Parker and Hickson. Harder tried to hypnotise the men, but they were too anxious and distracted for the procedure to work – Parker especially so. Hynek withheld ultimate judgment on the case, but did announce that, in his judgment, Hickson and Parker were honest men who

seemed genuinely distressed about what had occurred.

Tiring of the publicity, Hickson and Parker went to Jones County, Mississippi (about 150 miles north of Pascagoula), where both men hoped to find relief from the situation with family members. Parker was eventually hospitalised for what was described as "an emotional breakdown".

In an interview several years after the claimed UFO event, Hickson speculated that the younger Parker fared worse after the encounter because he had never previously undergone a profoundly frightening ordeal. While Hickson described the UFO encounter as the most terrifying event of his life, he also noted that he had seen combat in the Korean War, and that he thus had some familiarity with traumatic experiences.

On 9 September 2011, Charles Hickson died aged 80, but he had never backed off from the alien abduction story despite ridicule. As noted above, both Parker and Hickson volunteered to take polygraph exams to prove their stories. In the end, only Hickson did so and passed; the examiner determined that Hickson believed the story about the UFO abduction.

CALVIN'S STORY

Calvin Parker avoided public and media attention following the event. Hickson appeared on Dick Cavett's TV talk show in January 1974 and spoke at occasional UFO conferences; he later co-wrote a book about the event with William Mendez, *UFO Contact at Pascagoula* (1983).

As soon as I began talking with Calvin he made it clear that he had never told his side of the story and now wanted to set the record straight. It wasn't long before Calvin

PUNCTURE MARKS NOTED ON
CHARLES HICKSON
CALVIN PARKER
SATURDAY, OCT. 18, 1973

Approximately 72 hours after Charles Hickson and Calvin Parker had been abducted into a strange-glowing object by humanoid-type beings, certain markings were found on their bodies of which both men could not account for their presence when questioned about them.

At the time of questioning these two men, both still showed signs of being in a mild state of shock. Both men's pupils showed signs of being dilated, and the reaction to light by the pupils were very slow in relation to what they should have been, suggesting that their eyes had been affected by the artificial intense lighting inside the craft.

During this period of interrogation by me, I found that both men when questioned on certain topics were apprehensive about answering, suggesting that both of them had been given a post hypnotic command not to answer certain questions, or that they were indeed scared to answer certain questions for some unknown fear.

Their reaction-time to certain stimuli-response activities was also very slow.

Three puncture-type marks were noted on Charles Hickson's left arm as indicated in the photos that were taken in his home that night by me in the presence of his wife and son-in-law and the son-in-law's wife, and Calvin Parker. A close examination revealed that the epidermis had been penetrated as if by a needle-like device in several different areas on the left arm, at the same time, certain sections of the epidermis had been removed in a circular fashion, although very small sections which could have only been observed by close inspection. The rest of Charles Hickson's body was also inspected, except for the genital region, of which he was questioned about in privacy. No other marks or rashes were noted.

Calvin Parker's body was also carefully inspected, except for the genital region, of which he was also questioned in privacy. Puncture-type marks of the same fashion were noted on the inside of his left foot as indicated in the photos. No other marks or rashes were noted on the rest of his body, except for natural occurring blemishes and pimples.



ABOVE: The 'puncture wounds' document possibly written by Dr James Harder and found in the files of the J Allen Hynek UFO Center for UFO Studies; the photo to the right may show puncture wounds to Hickson's left arm. BELOW: Artist's impression of Calvin Parker's memories of a female entity examining him.

and I decided to work together on his own book, which we called *Pascagoula: The Closest Encounter – My Story* by Calvin Parker (2018).

The first thing Calvin wanted to correct was his statement that at the beginning of the 1973 encounter, when he and Charles Hickson saw the three entities 'float' out of the craft, he had "passed out". This was not true, he now said, and he had full recall of being taken on board the UFO and subjected to a similar 'examination' to that reported by Hickson. So why had he and Hickson said that Calvin had "passed out" and therefore had no recollection of what took place onboard the alien ship? Calvin was only 18 years old at the time, and the 42-year-old Hickson sought, throughout the whole affair, to protect his young friend from the fallout. The story that Calvin had "passed out" – as told in Hickson's book and various articles – was meant to achieve this: but it was not true. Calvin Parker did not pass out and had a full recollection of being taken aboard the craft, just like Hickson had. Calvin's description of this event closely mirrors how Hickson described their close encounter. However, Parker also described encountering an almost human-looking female entity onboard the craft who removed part of his clothing and conducted some kind of medical examination on him. A 'tube' was inserted into his foot, which hurt.

THE PUNCTURE WOUND DOCUMENT

After the book was published I continued my search for any formal documentation related to the incident; everything in Calvin's possession had been washed away by hurricane Katrina. I contacted all of the major UFO groups, including the J Allen Hynek Center for UFO Studies in the USA. They were very obliging and sent me a PDF file of what they had on the case. Most of this was newspaper



JASON GLEAVES

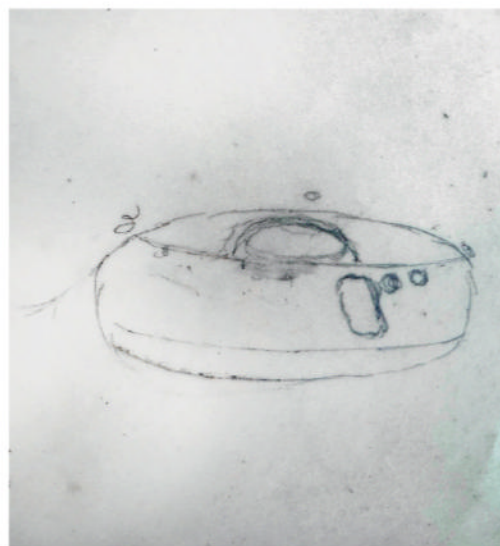
cuttings, but buried in the middle of the file was a very curious type-written document – a possible 'smoking gun'.

Although this document, dated 13 October 1973, just two days after the alien encounter, is unsigned, it must have been written by Dr James Harder, as he was the only person to examine the witnesses. Harder and Hynek were on site in Pascagoula within 36 hours of the encounter happening. Dr Harder's academic credentials are as follows: BS (Caltech), MS, Ph.D., (UC Berkeley). He is a Fellow, AAAS; Life Member, ASCE; Founding Member, Society for Scientific Exploration; Professor Emeritus, UC Berkeley. He was also a director of the UFO research group APRO (the Aerial Phenomena Research Organiza-

tion).

This 'smoking gun' document had not been made public before, and can only add to the authenticity of Parker and Hickson's testimony. Calvin Parker had this to say about the document:

"At the time of my abduction on October 11th, 1973, when the alien reached out to take me on board the ship. From the first time I saw them it was the fear I felt that is hard to describe. I just knew I would not live through this fear. As the alien made contact to my left arm I heard a whisk of what I thought was air then all at once I got became really relaxed then all the fear was gone. Later on, after being examined by Dr James Harder, I heard him telling Dr Hynek that I had puncture marks on my arm, and later



ABOVE LEFT: David Marler, Executive Director of the National UFO Historical Records Center, with some of the Pascagoula recordings located in the APRO files. **ABOVE RIGHT:** A recently discovered and previously unpublished pencil sketch of the UFO made by Charles Hickson in 1973. **BELOW:** Calvin Parker photographed in 2019.

at the hospital I found out that I was given not one shot but two shots. The second was while I was on board the craft. This document simply confirms what I have always known and that is both Charlie and I were given injections by these creatures and we had the puncture wounds to prove it."

I have been involved in UFO research for decades and have spent a great deal of time investigating UFO events first-hand. At no time have we ever come across any official documentation that confirms that 'puncture wounds', as described by witnesses, have been officially documented by a professional in such a manner. For me, this is a first. Charles Hickson's encounter and his description of feeling a prick on his inner forearm when grabbed by the creatures now seems to have been confirmed, as does Calvin Parker's assertion that something was stuck into the underside of his foot and that it hurt him. The document mentions that photographs of these marks were taken. No photos were located in the file; but that was not the end of things.

THE PUNCTURE WOUND PHOTOS

Many colleagues involved in UFO research know that I am constantly on the lookout for any information related to the Pascagoula case. Every now and then I will politely pester them to see if anything new has come to light.

On 22 July 2021, an email arrived from Mark Rodeghier of CUFOs (Center for UFO Studies), who had originally sent us the CUFOs file on Pascagoula. It read:

"Hello Philip, I was going through some boxes of varied materials yesterday and ran across a folder with the attached photos of Hickson and Parker taken at the time of the incident. Perhaps you already have good copies of these, but I thought it was worth sending scans, just in case. And in anticipation of your question, there was nothing else in the folder except these photos. Best, Mark."

Much to my amazement, the two photos that Mark attached could well be those men-



tioned in the 'puncture wounds' document, although we cannot of course be 100 per cent certain of this. I was astounded and grateful in equal measure: this only goes to show what positive results can be achieved when colleagues in UFO research work together and share information.

Mark got back the very next day and explained a little more of how he came across the photos:

"Philip, I'm pleased to hear that these are something you didn't have.

"There are indeed handwritten notes on the back of each photo that provide the person's name and date (that's all). The photos were in a CUFOs file, with only the photos, buried in a box of various types of material that I was searching through for something else. Although originally, I'm sure they came to Hynek, who then placed them at some point in the regular CUFOs archival materials."

One of the first people we showed the photos to was of course Calvin Parker. Shortly after he viewed them, I spoke with him via Skype at his home in Mississippi. For the

record, he had been suffering from a life-threatening illness throughout 2021, had undergone major surgery and was on a lot of medication. Calvin, as honest as ever, could not recollect having any photos taken, but he does remember that Dr Harder gave him and Charles Hickson a physical examination just after the incident in 1973. It would have been far easier for Calvin to simply go along with the story and say he remembered having the photos taken, but he didn't.

The days after their alien encounter were of course chaotic and Calvin was suffering badly from the after-effects. It wouldn't be long before he would be in the hospital with a breakdown, and he would be haunted by these events for the rest of his life. As Charles Hickson had passed away in 2011 I could not ask him about the photos. Dr James Harder is also deceased. Despite this, these photos are very intriguing and may well support the information outlined in the puncture wounds document and the verbal testimony of both Parker and Hickson.

THE NEW WITNESSES

One thing that did happen after Calvin Parker published his book in 2018 was the emergence of many new first-hand, independent eyewitnesses. Some of these witnesses saw something unusual a few nights before the Parker-Hickson encounter and others on the days and weeks afterwards. It was at this point that I asked my colleague Dr Irena Scott, in Ohio, if she would help me interview these people. So far, she has interviewed over 30 such witnesses; some came forward of their own volition and others we located ourselves. Probably the most important of these witnesses are Mr and Mrs Blair. They were on the opposite side of the Pascagoula River that night of 11 October 1973 and at the same time as Parker and Hickson began their evening's fishing (see panel, "The Blair Encounter").

The Blairs' sighting – and possible close encounter – adds yet another page to the Pascagoula story. As I said previously, Dr Scott

PASCAGOULA: THE BLAIR ENCOUNTER

DR IRENA SCOTT tells the strange story of Maria and Jerry Blair. Were the young couple independent witnesses to the Pascagoula abduction, or does Maria's recent claim that they too were abducted simply muddy the waters?

For perhaps the first time in UFO history, two independent close encounter or abduction events were reported as occurring at the same time and place. After Calvin Parker published his first book he took part in local, national and international media interviews. One of Parker's interviews was presented on FOX 10 NEWS. A video of this was posted on YouTube on 14 January 2019. A woman called Tracee saw it and posted a comment under the video.

She said that her parents had been there on the Pascagoula River that night in 1973. Her mother had been telling her for years about seeing UFOs in the same area at the same time as the famous abduction episode. She guessed that what they had seen and described was the same incident, down to the blue lights coming down.

Clearly, there could be independent witnesses to the abduction. Philip Mantle obtained information about Tracee's parents, Maria and Jerry Blair, and I interviewed them; they told much the same story as each other, except that Jerry was quite sceptical about UFOs. However, Maria seemed very emotional talking about a 'thing' that came out of the water and looked like a man.

She told me that on 11 October 1973 she and Jerry, then a young just-married couple, were in a car near a pier on the east side of the Pascagoula River in Mississippi. They were waiting for Jerry's boss to show up, after which the two men would leave on a boat to work offshore. While they were waiting, Jerry went to sleep and Maria saw what she described as a strange blue light travelling back and forth above the river. At the time she thought it was a plane or helicopter and that the pilot was lost because it did not seem to be going anywhere; it just seemed to wander around.

Then Jerry decided to put his gear on the boat, although his boss had still not arrived, and asked Maria to walk down the small pier with him. It was after dark – around 9pm. As they walked, they heard a big splash as if something or someone had fallen in the water. Maria saw something come out of the water on her side of the pier. She said to Jerry that there was somebody out there. Something had come up out of the water and gone back down and it looked like a person – a "grey-man" she called it. Jerry said, "Oh come on, there ain't nobody out there." She thought the person would have to come back up to breathe, so she



JERRY SAID THAT HE SAW THEM, BUT "DID NOT WANT TO SEE THEM"



waited. The water rippled. She again said there was somebody out there. Jerry said to come on. Although he told her there was nobody out there, she knew she had seen it. She didn't think much about it until the next day when the Pascagoula abduction was reported in the news. She discovered that the encounter had taken place at the same time they had been there, but on the other side of the river.

For 45 years, Maria never talked about it to anyone except her family. They only told their two daughters about seeing the blue UFO and nothing else. Jerry wanted her to keep it quiet, because people would think she was crazy.

In September 2019 Maria contacted

LEFT: Mr & Mrs Blair circa 1973. **BELOW:** Jerry and Maria Blair on the Pascagoula River in 2019. **FACING PAGE:** Maria Blair (on sofa) with hypnotherapist Crystal Slaughter in 2022.

both Philip Mantle and Calvin Parker. She called from the hospital. Jerry had been in very poor health for some time and was about to undergo a surgical procedure. She said there was something he wanted to tell them. He had not talked about it before because of fear of harassment and ridicule.

He said he had seen the same events as his wife and remembered more than she did. He had seen the grey-humanoid creature moving away to the other side of the river and had also witnessed the blue lights on the UFO. His most dramatic claim, though, was that he and Maria had also been abducted by beings that were six feet (1.8m) tall and grey in colour. Two of them had grabbed him and got control of him. He said that he saw them, "but did not want to see them". One of the beings stood in front of the others and Jerry thought this was the leader. The beings floated them into their craft where they performed an examination on him that he tried to resist. Maria said Jerry recalled watching the beings float back across the river until he could no longer see them. Then he watched the craft shoot straight up and out of sight.

Jerry died not long after sharing his story with Maria. She did not remember the abduction, but was sure that something had happened to her and her husband back in 1973; and she had a memory of seeing something in her peripheral vision. The subject of hypnosis came up, but after Jerry's death she did not wish to undergo regression. However in 2022, Philip Mantle organised a hypnosis session at Maria's request.

After hypnosis was induced, Maria was at first confused and very scared. She didn't know where Jerry was and wanted to find him. She thought she was floating in the air. Then she said something was in control of her. A door opened and a being was taking her to the door. Then she was inside. She thought she had been given some form of sedative but did not feel any needle. She said there had been a blue light that had flared out on both sides of the object. She didn't see the beings walk; they floated. She said they had taken control of her mind.

Then she saw a table. They laid her on



the table. They put a thin metallic thing over her and it hovered over her female parts. She thought they were interested in her DNA and her eggs. When the machine passed over her, nothing hurt. It was taking information. She was terrified. The hypnotist asked her what the beings wanted to know. She said they were interested in children. Their goal was to make children that look like people so they can live among us. She said the aliens “need their children to look like humans. So they can roam the Earth and look like us.” She was asked about their ultimate mission. Maria said it was to be among us. She was asked about the benefit of being among us. Maria said that their mission was to help mankind. Then she was back at the pier. They had no parting words when they dropped her off and seemed in a hurry. After she was back, she located her husband and he got on the boat.

The hypnotist asked her if she had any more comments. She said the beings had made an agreement with her husband: he had told them not to let her know. And they had agreed. She thought Jerry had been aware of them before that night and had been in contact with them previously. Jerry said that he’d seen them, but he “didn’t want to see them”. She now understood why he had said that. He had known what they were and what they were capable of doing, and he didn’t want her to know: “He knew they were going to attack me. He knew that they were going to come get me [crying]. I don’t know what he had with them, but he knew.”

The hypnotist asked why she was chosen and she said because she was a woman. It was all about life, maybe evolution, and making new beings. She said: “They are among us now.” And added, oddly, that “they have people drive cars. They are humanoids that drive cars. They

look like that. They aren’t real. They are among us right now. They control their cars; the humanoids control the cars... They’re not real.” (It is strange that she began to talk about cars. Parker and Hickson found their car had been damaged, but didn’t know how.) She said the beings are here but trying to disguise themselves to look like normal people. They are all over the planet.

Maria was very emotional after the regressive hypnosis session. I must add that the hypnotherapist, Crystal Slaughter, was a professional and had no prior knowledge of the UFO encounter and was given no information concerning it; she was simply asked to try and take Maria back to a certain place and time.

We know that there are good arguments against the use of regressive hypnosis; but even if we remove the hypnosis testimony from this story, there is still a story. Both Maria and Jerry saw the blue illuminated UFO on the other side of the Pascagoula River that night at the same time as Charlie Hickson and Calvin Parker. They were probably too far away to make out the two men, but it is highly likely that they were indeed witnesses to the close encounter.

From the beginning, Maria had the **impression that something else had happened to them that night; 45 years later**, her husband Jerry finally told her that they too had had an abduction experience. Even though Jerry was very ill at the time, Maria was angry with him for having kept this a secret for decades. You could say that Jerry was making a kind of ‘death bed confession’ and finally told his wife what had happened. It was obvious that he wanted to get this account out in the open before he passed away.

We must also clarify that Maria and Jerry did not come forward to tell their story. Were it not for their daughter’s comment on YouTube, then we would never have heard anything about it.



PHILIP MANTLE

ABOVE: Calvin Parker with Philip Mantle’s 2023 book on Pascagoula, *Beyond Reasonable Doubt*.

has interviewed over 30 other witnesses, but the Blairs are the only ones to report such an encounter.

The investigation into this case continues. I was contacted in 2023 by a lady called Chelsea Norton Prince who runs the Ocean Springs Historical Society in Mississippi. Ms Prince had been given two boxes of paperwork that once belonged to Charles Hickson. There were no ‘smoking guns’ in this paperwork, but interestingly there was a pencil sketch of the UFO drawn by Charles Hickson. In late 2023 I was contacted by David Marler, the Executive Director of the National UFO Historical Records Center in Albuquerque, New Mexico (**FT432:51, 440:26, 49**). David had been donated a large collection of files and related material from the long defunct UFO group APRO. Dr James Harder was part of APRO. In this material David located five audio files that had never seen the light of day before and all of which related to the Pascagoula case. One of the recordings is Dr J Allen Hynek interviewing Sheriff Fred Diamond. Again, no smoking gun, but a fascinating piece of UFO history.

Calvin Parker passed away in August 2023 (obit., **FT438:26**). Despite never meeting in person we had become very good friends. I promised him just a few days before he died that I would continue to investigate this case and to do my best to uncover as much information as I could and, with my research partner Dr Irena Scott, locate and interview as many witnesses as possible. During 2024 we interviewed several new witnesses and uncovered some unique and historic pieces of TV material.

Our search continues...

For previous FT coverage of the Pascagoula abduction, see **FT2:18, 119:38-43, 122:52, 375:55, 381:30, 438:26, 29**.



♦ **PHILIP MANTLE** is a veteran British UFO researcher, author and publisher and the founder of Flying Disk Press. His new four-part documentary series *Pascagoula 73* is currently streaming on Amazon.

Strangers in a Strange Land

Over the years, the tale of two strange children with green skins and speaking an unknown language appearing in a Suffolk village has been told and retold many times. As a result, it has attracted the attentions of historians, folklorists and fortune tellers – but is this mediæval mystery any closer to being solved?

JOHN CLARK, author of a major new book on the subject, offers an overview – and another potential explanation...

They were green. There were other strange things about the two children, a boy and a girl, found by harvesters in the fields of the Suffolk village of Woolpit on a summer's day in the 12th century. But it was their green skin that people first noticed. There was much more to the story, but that's how it began.¹

THE STORY

Two mediæval chroniclers reported this mysterious event and its consequences: William of Newburgh, an Augustinian canon at Newburgh Priory in Yorkshire, and Ralph of Coggeshall, abbot of a small Cistercian house in north Essex (see FT377:40-45). Ralph's chapter "Concerning a boy and a girl who emerged from the ground" appeared in his *Chronicon Anglicanum* (*English Chronicle*). Ralph did not finish writing his *Chronicle* until the 1220s, but he incorporated text he had written much earlier, and, in the case of the Green Children, details he had been told by Sir Richard de Calne and his family, who had given the children refuge. William of Newburgh included a chapter "Concerning green children" in his *Historia Rerum Anglicarum* (*History of English Affairs*), finished in about 1198, and based it on reports from a number of sources. But his main source seems to have been an early draft of Ralph of Coggeshall's account.

William dates the event to the time of King Stephen (1135–1154). Ralph includes the story of the Green Children between accounts of the wild man discovered at Orford in Suffolk "in the time of king Henry the



LEFT: The village sign of Woolpit, showing the Green Children.

second" (1154–1189) and of "giant's teeth" found in Essex "in the time of king Richard" (1189–1199). A date as late as the reign of King Richard I is not possible, for Ralph had heard the story from Sir Richard de Calne himself – and Richard de Calne died before King Richard came to the throne. And the green girl had been a servant in the de Calne household for many years. A compromise "mid-12th-century" is probably the safest option.

The village of Woolpit lies a few miles from Bury St Edmunds, with its great mediæval abbey – in the Middle Ages Woolpit's landlord was the Abbot of Bury himself. And in the fields of Woolpit harvesters found two terrified children, a boy and a girl, apparently emerging from a pit. Their skin was green all over – Ralph of Coggeshall says it was "*prassinus color*", the dark green colour of the leaves of leeks. They were strangely dressed and spoke an unknown language. The villagers took them "weeping inconsolably" some eight miles to Wykes, the manor house of Sir Richard de Calne in the parish of Bardwell. Not much is known about Sir Richard, but he may already have been owner of Wykes by 1135,

and died in about 1188; the de Calne family owned various other properties in Suffolk and Essex.

Sir Richard and his family took the children in. They were starving, but for some days they refused all the food they were offered – the girl later said that they had

THE BOY, WHO SEEMED TO BE THE YOUNGER, WAS SICKLY AND DIED



DAVID PIKE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: The village of Woolpit today. BELOW: A map of East Anglia, showing places mentioned in the article.

thought the food was “inedible”. By chance, they saw some fresh-cut beanstalks, and made signs to be given them. A bystander had to show them how to open the pods to get to the beans, but then “they ate them with great joy, and would touch no other food at all for a long time”.

The boy, who seemed to be the younger, was sickly and died, but the girl, says Ralph, “becoming used to all sorts of food [...] totally lost her leek-green colour, and gradually recovered the ruddy appearance of her whole body”.

Once they had learnt our language the children (or the surviving girl, according to Ralph) explained that they had come from a land where the Sun never shone and the light was like twilight here – Ralph adds that everybody and everything there was green. William reports that the children said it was a Christian land; they called it St Martin’s Land and said St Martin was venerated there. From it, another brighter land could be seen across a broad river. According to William the children could not explain how they came to our land. While herding their father’s cattle they had heard a loud noise, and suddenly found themselves in Woolpit among the harvesters. Ralph, on the other hand, says that they had followed the cattle into a cavern and had become lost; following the sound of bells, they had eventually come out into our land.

Ralph was told by Richard de Calne and members of his household that the girl had worked as a servant at Wykes for many



years, but that she was badly behaved. William had heard that she eventually married a man in King’s Lynn and was still living there shortly before he wrote his *History* in 1198.

INTERPRETATIONS

The Green Children first came to modern attention in 1850, when pioneer folklorist Thomas Keightley included a translation of Ralph of Coggeshall’s account in his book *The Fairy Mythology*. This set the tone for the treatment of the story by most modern

authors – they have assumed it was a traditional folktale, handed down from generation to generation. The children had strayed from a fairy Otherworld. Folklorists should look for parallels in traditional accounts of dealings with the fairy folk – and they found them. And as a “Suffolk folktale” the story has been retold, reworked and reimagined ever since. It has inspired short stories, novels, poetry, plays, songs, and children’s operas. Two of Britain’s most distinguished 20th-century composers, Benjamin Britten and Peter Maxwell Davies, independently considered it as the subject of an opera, but neither project came to fruition.

Meanwhile academic historians have debated why mediæval chroniclers incorporated stories of “wonders” like the Green Children – which the same modern historians have dismissed as “fictions” – into their texts. Historian Nancy Partner concluded: “I consider the process of worrying over the suggestive details of these wonderfully pointless miracles in an effort to find natural or psychological explanations of what ‘really’, if anything, happened, to be useless...”

Instead, an interest in “what ‘really’, if anything, happened” largely fell to fortean investigators, to the extent that a contributor to *FT* described the story as “a classic example of ‘forteana’” (see **FT132:56**). Charles Fort himself gives no account of the Green Children, but he might have included it in his third book *Lo!*, between Indian feral “wolf children” and Kaspar Hauser.

In 1998, for *FT*'s sister publication, Steve Moore's *Fortean Studies*, Paul Harris wrote a fully argued attempt at a "down-to-earth" explanation of the Green Children.² Harris concluded that various "elements of folklore" identifiable in the story were the result either of coincidence or of "the conscious or unconscious 'working in' to the story of these themes by the chroniclers".

Assuming that the children's "greenness" was an extreme greenish pallor brought on by anaemia, Harris argued that it was an identifiable medical condition – "chlorosis". In doing so he understandably ignored Ralph of Coggeshall's identification of the children's colour as *prassinus* – dark green; for Harris used Thomas Keightley's 1850 translation of Ralph's account, and Keightley had translated both *viridis* and *prassinus* as "green", without acknowledging the more specific meaning of the latter term. Chlorosis or "green sickness" is no longer recognised by the medical profession, but was still in the 19th century a favoured term for chronic weakness, languor and anaemia in teenage girls. Yet the extent of "greenness" in the pallid complexions of sufferers was debated even then: "the slightest imaginable tint of olive green in the shadow beneath the chin, but that is all" wrote one doctor – nothing like Ralph of Coggeshall's description: "The whole surface of their skin was stained with a green colour."

Harris went on to present a down-to-earth but imaginative scenario to explain the children's evident "foreignness" – they were children of immigrants caught up in racist violence. Specifically, he identified them as children of Flemish clothworkers, settled in the village of Fornham St Martin, a few miles west of Woolpit – the children's "St Martin's Land". And in 1173 at Fornham royalist forces defeated an army led by the Earl of Leicester, fighting in support of the rebellion of "Young King Henry" against his father, Henry II. Leicester's army included many Flemish mercenaries. The Flemings, fleeing after their defeat, were set upon and slaughtered by local villagers, and Harris suggested that this violence extended to peacefully-settled local immigrant families. Harris's explanation ticks many boxes – at the expense of ignoring others – but there is no historical evidence to suggest any Flemish settlement in this area.

Meanwhile, Scottish astronomer Duncan Lunan was undertaking a painstaking study of mediæval documents (first summarised in an article in the science fiction magazine *Analog* in 1996 and published as a book in 2012) to reconstruct the family history of Richard de Calne, the political activities of kings and royal servants, and the scientific



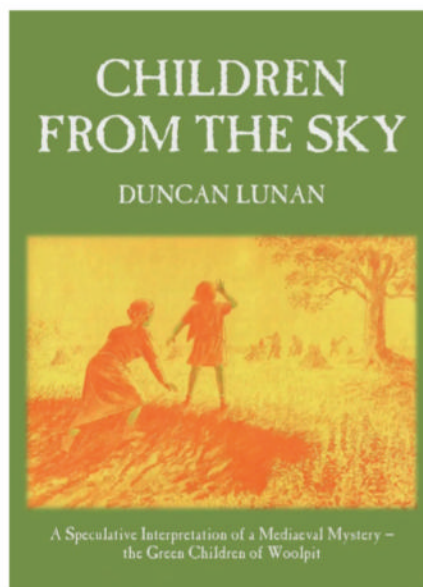
LEFT: 19th-century sufferer from chlorosis in Marshall Hall, *Commentaries on Some of the More Important of the Diseases of Females* (1827). BELOW: Duncan Lunan offered a "speculative" interpretation of the Green Children story in his 2012 book.

involvement of King Henry II and the Templar knights in secret dealings with extraterrestrial entities, to create what he called "A Speculative Treatment of a Medieval Mystery". Lunan's interpretation of the mediæval evidence is enthusiastic rather than well-founded.

The "extraterrestrial" hypothesis was not new. In the 17th century philosopher Robert Burton, arguing that the Moon and the other planets were inhabited, suggested that the Green Children had fallen from the Moon. His contemporary Francis Godwin, in his pioneering science fiction novel *The Man in the Moone* (1638), incorporated various elements from the Green Children story in his account of a journey to the Moon and the strange civilisation the traveller found there. And in 1959 Harold Wilkins, in a book on *Mysteries Solved and Unsolved*, surmised that the children were "teleported" through a vortex in

space from a parallel universe or a subterranean existence on another planet, perhaps Mars ("St Martin's Land").

WILKINS SURMISED THEY HAD BEEN TELEPORTED FROM A PARALLEL UNIVERSE



significance of various wonders reported by mediæval writers.³ He combined his historical study with speculations about a human colony on a distant planet, a "matter transmitter" linking that planet to Earth, and the

FOREIGNERS OR FAIRIES?

When we compare the two accounts left to us by William and Ralph, it is clear that there are two elements to the story: "the framing narrative" – the discovery of the children, their appearance, their behaviour and their ultimate fate, for which there were eyewitnesses (some of whom Ralph of Coggeshall met) – and "the children's story" – what, presumably some time later, when they had learnt English, the children said in response to questions.

Our two chroniclers largely agree about "what happened" – and our likely conclusion today is that the children were "foreign". Woolpit lay beside a major mediæval road linking the port of Ipswich with Bury St Edmunds, where annual trade fairs attracted foreign merchants, while another road led via Thetford to the shrine at Walsingham in Norfolk, a centre of international pilgrimage. Woolpit's villagers may have seen "outlandish" travellers on these roads.

Yet the children with their green skin and their diet of beans were more alien. There were travellers' tales of monstrous races living on the edges of the known world, but thoughts would have turned to more local "Otherworlds": to a story circulating in the 12th century of the land of the Antipodes reached through the Peak Cavern in Derbyshire, for example. Or of the small boy



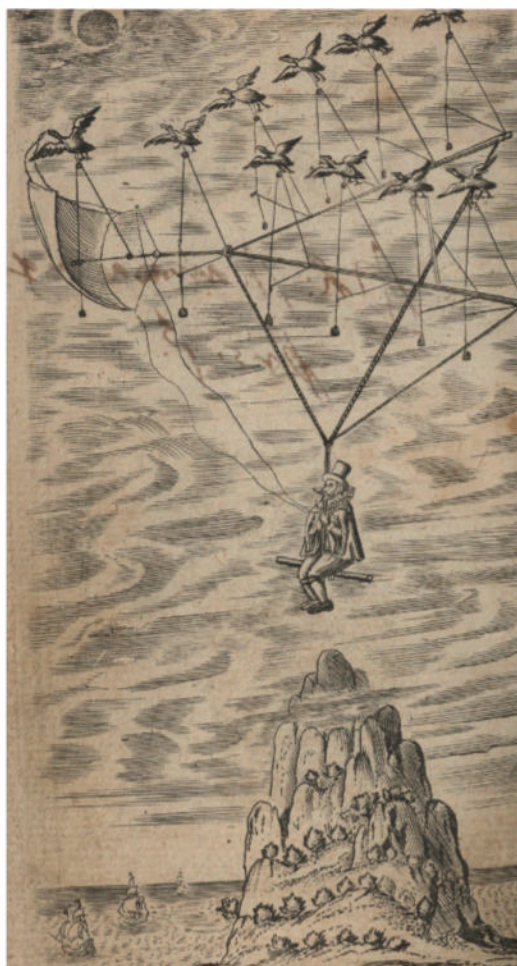
ABOVE: Kevin Crossley-Holland's retelling of the story, first published in 1966, featured charming illustrations of the Green Children by Margaret Gordon. **BELOW:** The frontispiece to the 1658 second edition of Francis Godwin's proto-science fiction novel of *The Man in the Moone*, which incorporated elements of the story.

in South Wales who, through a cave under a riverbank, visited a land inhabited by people "no bigger than pygmies": the Sun did not shine there, and the light was like twilight here.

Perhaps, as the children ate ordinary food and their green colour faded, some concluded that they were, after all, "mortals" like us. However, once the children had learnt enough English to respond to questions, their answers reinforced expectations of "otherness". And the questions may have been leading ones. Someone, according to William of Newburgh, actually asked if the Sun rose in the land they came from. They replied "the Sun does not rise among our people. Our land [...] gets only the amount of light that among you precedes sunrise or follows sunset". The questioner's suspicion was confirmed – it was a twilight, perhaps subterranean, Otherworld like the one in South Wales!

The children's responses to what William described as "persistent questioners" were incoherent. The reactions of children put under similar pressure in modern times – for example, in cases of accusations of "Satanic ritual abuse" – warn us what to expect: a mixture of memories and fantasy, moulded by a desperate desire to tell the adult questioners the sort of story they evidently hoped to hear.

The form in which their story has come down to us was clearly influenced by mediæval concepts of a "folkloric" Otherworld – although it might have been



against strict Church doctrine, and William of Newburgh expressed his doubts. But Ralph of Coggeshall seems to have accepted the children's otherworldly origins. Writing many years after the death of his chief informant, Richard de Calne, Ralph had time both to misremember and to elaborate the story he had heard. His claim that the children had followed straying cattle into a cavern and, after wandering for a long time, had come out into the summer sunlight of Woolpit's fields seems to be his deliberate reversal of a common motif in folktales – a mortal follows an animal into a cave in our world, and eventually comes out in a fairy Otherworld.

STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND

Today, sceptics may accept at least that "something happened" and that the Green Children existed – they were not a folktale. On the other hand the "fairy Otherworld" explanation that might have satisfied people in the 12th century is no longer acceptable. We fall back on piecemeal explanations, identifying the children as foreigners or immigrants suffering from some sort of medical condition, at the cost of setting aside elements that don't fit our chosen scenario.

And the more complex and "plausible" our explanation is, the more it distracts us from the truth of the tale. Over the years a great burden of interpretation and surmise has been laid on the slight shoulders

BROAD BEANS, FAVISM AND RACISM



LEFT: A possible medical explanation for the Green Children's strange skin colour might be favism, an extreme allergic reaction to broad beans well known in the Middle East. **FACING PAGE:** Scenes from the Martyrdom of Robert of Bury, by an unknown artist, c.1480-1490.

Disregarding Ralph of Coggeshall's claim that they were *prassinus*, dark green, the Green Children's coloration has been attributed to extreme anaemia, resulting in a greenish pallor. Two medical explanations have been offered: *chlorosis* ("green sickness") and *favism* – an extreme allergic reaction to chemicals inherent in fava beans (broad beans), the beans the children ate.

In a recent book, Canadian historian Paul Edward Dutton argued strongly in favour of the favism diagnosis.¹

Favism is a result of a deficiency of the Glucose-6-Phosphate Dehydrogenase (G6PD) enzyme. In most people the condition is symptomless, but it can lead to dramatic red blood cell breakdown. This breakdown can be triggered by eating broad (fava) beans, particularly raw or with their skins on, or even breathing the scent and pollen of bean flowers.² Symptoms include disorientation, weakness, severe haemolytic anaemia, jaundice, and in extreme cases kidney failure and death. It is the combination of jaundice and anaemia that Dutton argues resulted in a coloration different from the mildly greenish pallor of simple anaemia. The disease mostly affects children – and boys in particular. The green boy was "sickly" and died, the girl lost her green colouring after becoming used to "normal" food.

But the children were already "green" when the villagers found them. If their greenness was due to favism, brought on by eating raw beans, they must already have been doing so before they were found. Perhaps they had been foraging in a village beanfield. Many

RELATIONS BETWEEN THE JEWS AND THE ABBEY AUTHORITIES WERE STRAINED

cases of favism occur in the Middle East at harvest time, when children assist their parents in the bean fields and eat beans straight from the pods. Yet when the children saw bean plants brought into the house and made signs to be given them, they apparently didn't recognise the pods that held the beans, and a bystander had to help them.

However, let's dismiss this as a misunderstanding, and accept that the children were suffering from severe favism, triggered by eating raw broad beans. G6PD deficiency is inherited. It offers us a clue to the origin of the Green Children – or at least their ancestry. Although the condition is known worldwide, it is prevalent in certain populations. It is rare in northern Europe, but common in the eastern Mediterranean area – including Greece and the Middle East. Folk wisdom in Iran dictates that beans should not be fed to children. This advice would have been unknown to villagers in mediæval Suffolk, who might have thought the children's choice of raw beans an aspect of their perceived "otherness", but would have seen no harm in it.

In considering why children from the Mediterranean area might be in 12th-century England Dutton notes only "the growing mobility of the wider European,

Mediterranean, and Middle Eastern populations in the 12th century". But there is one particular group with ancestry in the Middle East whose presence in 12th-century England is already well documented. And in his regular FT column on "Fairies, Folklore and Forteania" Simon Young recently offered a "wild speculation": that the children were *Jewish*, and had refused the food they were offered because they feared it was not kosher (see **FT449:25**).

G6PD deficiency affects Jews among others of eastern Mediterranean descent – it is reported that 50–65 per cent of male Kurdish Jews have the condition. And it is recognised as a genetic condition still widespread among Jews of the Diaspora.³

The earliest evidence for Jewish presence in mediæval England is after the Norman Conquest, when Jewish merchants and their families from northern French towns like Rouen began to settle in English towns.⁴ By the 1180s, Jews from France, Spain, Germany and Italy, and even one from Russia, are recorded as resident in England. And by 1158 there was a thriving Jewish settlement in Bury St Edmunds.⁵

The relations between the Jews of Bury and the Abbey authorities that controlled the town were strained. Elsewhere in England, Jews lived under the protection of the king. Western Suffolk, however, was the "Liberty of St Edmund" – within this area, the Abbot was effectively the king's viceroy and claimed authority over local Jews. According to the Abbey's historian, Jocelin of Brakelond, there was at one time a "pro-Jewish" faction led by the Sacrist, William. Money was borrowed from the Jews, their money was safeguarded in the Abbey treasury, and Jews had free access to the Abbey buildings "even while Mass was being celebrated".

According to Jocelin, "in the time of war" (the civil war between King Henry II and supporters of his son "Young King Henry" in the 1170s) Jewish women and children were given refuge within the Abbey walls. Locally, this war culminated in the Battle of Fornham in 1173 – the battle which Paul Harris surmised provoked anti-Flemish violence, and the con-

text in which he identified the Green Children as strays from a local Flemish immigrant family.

In 1181 Bury Jews were accused of kidnapping and murdering a local child, Robert – the familiar “blood libel” – and in 1182 Samson of Tottington, who had no sympathy for the Bury Jews, was appointed Abbot. During riots on Palm Sunday in 1190, 57 Jews were killed, and Abbot Samson expelled the whole Jewish community from the town.

Although the dreadful events of 1190 were too late to be directly relevant to the story of the Green Children, we may need to reconsider the circumstances of 1173 and “the time of war” as a possible context for their appearance. But had there been other violent outbreaks against Jews in Bury St Edmunds, from which the children had fled? Or were they strays from a group of Jewish travellers from elsewhere in Europe on their way from the port of Ipswich to join the Jewish community in Bury, whose route would have taken them past Woolpit? What was their strange language? And when the girl later explained that they had thought that all the types of food they were offered were “*incomestibilia*”, literally “inedible things”, did she mean the food was “not to be eaten” – in other words, “not kosher”?

It is ironic that if the green girl was living in Lynn only a few years before William of Newburgh wrote his *History* in 1198, she may have witnessed, in January 1190, a local anti-Jewish riot, when a number of Jews were killed and their houses looted and burned.⁶

So we can construct yet another exciting and “plausible” narrative about “what really happened” – at the cost of disregarding contradictory elements in the only original accounts we have. But



the essential mystery of the Green Children remains intact, and will continue to inspire speculation.

NOTES

1 Paul Edward Dutton, *Micro Middle Ages*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, pp.11–53. Dutton’s work appeared too late for me to discuss his conclusions in my own book, but for prior comments on favism and its implications for the origin of the Green Children see John Clark *The Green Children of Woolpit*, pp.118–19; 123–24.

2 Mark A Belsey, “The epidemiology of favism”, *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 48 (1973), pp.1–13.

3 Chicago Center for Jewish Genetic Disorders: “Sephardi Disorders: Glucose-6-Phosphate Dehydrogenase Deficiency” <https://www.jewishgeneticscenter.org/what/glucose-6-phosphate-dehydrogenase-deficiency-g6pd/> (accessed 29 Nov 2024); Forward: “Genetic Diseases That Affect Sephardic Jews” <https://forward.com/culture/181592/genetic-diseases-that-affect-sephardic-jews/> (accessed 29 Nov 2024).

4 Cecil Roth, *A History of the Jews in England*, 3rd edn, Clarendon Press, 1964, pp.1–17.

5 Joe and Caroline Hillaby, *The Palgrave Dictionary of Medieval Anglo-Jewish History*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp.68–72.

6 *Ibid.*, p.261.

of our two little waifs: by the villagers and the de Calne household who thought they were strays from a fairy Otherworld; by the chroniclers who included them in their chapters on “wondrous events”; by folklorists mining the story for “folktale motifs” and historians explaining the hidden agendas of mediæval chroniclers; by 17th-century philosophers speculating about the plurality of inhabited worlds; by modern “extraterrestrial” theorists; and not least by those who have sought down-to-earth explanations.

For, in the end, we should remember what the story was really about – two lost, frightened and lonely children, taken in by strangers, and caught up in a narrative over which they had no control. In an interview in 2012 Kevin Crossley-Holland, whose retellings of the story have been among the best and most popular, said: “In a way, they stand for all the refugees, all the homeless, all the people in camps, all the dispossessed, who walk across our Middle Earth.”⁴

And historian Diane Purkiss concluded: “The power of the story comes in the end from our pity for these ultimate strangers in a strange land.”⁵

NOTES

1 What follows is based upon my new book: John Clark, *The Green Children of Woolpit: Chronicles, Fairies and Facts in Medieval England*, University of Exeter Press, 2024. (For a review see **FT452:58**.)

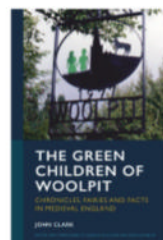
2 Paul Harris, “The Green Children of Woolpit: a 12th century mystery and its possible solution”, in *Fortean Studies*, Vol. 4, ed. Steve Moore, John Brown Publishing, 1998, pp.81–95. See also Harris’s earlier article in **FT57:39–41**.

3 Duncan Lunan, “Children from the sky”, *Analog: Science Fiction, Science Fact*, 116:11 (Sept 1996), pp.39–53; *Children from the Sky: A Speculative Treatment of a Medieval Mystery – the Green Children of Woolpit*, Mutus Liber, 2012.

4 “A visit from Kevin Crossley-Holland”, *The History Girls* blog, 29 March 2012, <http://the-history-girls.blogspot.com/2012/03/visit-from-kevin-crossley-holland.html> (accessed 2 Dec 2024).

5 Diane Purkiss, *Troublesome Things: A History of Fairies and Fairy Stories*, Allen Lane, 2000, p.63.

❖ **JOHN CLARK** was for many years Curator of the mediæval collections at the Museum of London (now London Museum). Since his retirement in 2009 he has continued research, lecturing and writing, particularly on byways of mediæval history and archaeology, and the way “real” history relates to legends and folklore. His book *The Green Children of Woolpit: Chronicles, Fairies and Facts in Medieval England* was recently published by University of Exeter Press. A discount of 30% is currently available on hardback copies ordered direct from the University of Exeter Press website by entering the code **FORTEAN30** at checkout. <https://www.exeterpress.co.uk/products/the-green-children-of-woolpit>



MARSUPIAL ATTACKS!

AN ANATOMY OF A HOAX

Back in 1996 Britain was reportedly facing invasion by an Australian marsupial with a large snout and a reputation for destroying crops – but the whole thing was a PR stunt for a new PlayStation game. **DR MIKE BENBOUGH-JACKSON** provides a brief history of the great bandicoot scare.

From the tail end of 1996 to early 1997, a speedy, nervous, omnivorous marsupial with a prominent snout caused a stir in Britain. Bandicoots had breached the island fortress and joined the by now ubiquitous grey squirrel and other less noticeable arrivals like the Chinese mitten crab. There is an important difference, however, between the bandicoot and the other intruders. To paraphrase Jean Baudrillard: the bandicoot invasion did not take place.

By March 1997, *Fortean Times* concluded that the bandicoot invasion was probably a commercially inspired hoax perpetuated by Sony to put the marsupial in the mind of the public just before the release of the PlayStation game *Crash Bandicoot*.¹ Classified adverts placed in the press by Douglas Dooley, the head of the Bandicoot Research Society (BRS) asked people to report any sightings of the marsupial.

FT discovered that Sony had paid Dooley to investigate the invasion, but the company denied any involvement in the establishment of the BRS. In a coincidence that would have amused Charles Fort, page 13 of the March edition of *FT* contained an advert for the *Official UK Sony PlayStation Magazine*.

Seeing as the bandicoot invasion has been long debunked, this article is not an exposé. Instead, it follows Charles Mackay's objective in *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* of taking a well-known event and adding "sufficient novelty of detail".² For those interested in psychosocial factors, a hoax often provides a starting point rather than the end of the story.

Moreover, in themselves, hoaxes can have an influence. This "obscure PR stunt" upset *FT* because it could make a laughing stock out of other efforts to understand all things strange. It is worth paying attention



LEFT: A southern brown Bandicoot and a long-nosed bandicoot caught on camera in a feisty moment. BELOW: Violet Philpott's bandicoot puppet. BOTTOM: The hoax classified ad, supposedly from the Bandicoot Research Society.



A HOAX OFTEN PROVIDES A STARTING POINT RATHER THAN THE END OF THE STORY



to the way hoaxes are framed, are related by context and spread. A bluff about a creature

renowned for its 'snout pokes' allows us to probe into the anatomy of a hoax.

BANDICOOTS IN BRITAIN

For those unaware of the creature that was the subject of this invasion scare, the bandicoot is a rat-to-rabbit-sized shrew-like quadruped. The 20 or so varieties of bandicoot come in many different shapes and sizes. They have long or short noses. Their ears also vary, with those of bilbies being rabbit-like. All have hairless tails – a feature shared by mice and rats that doubtless resulted in some British bandicoot sightings.

The bandicoot's natural range runs from Tasmania to Papua New Guinea, where it has some supernatural associations that, unfortunately for us fortune-tellers, did not figure during the hoax.³ Like many animals towards the bottom of the food chain, bandicoots have a short gestation period. Southern brown bandicoots give birth in a fortnight or less. Nothing speaks of 'pest' more than rapid rates of reproduction and a taste for crops.

For the invasion to gain a foothold, the BRS needed to frame the bandicoot in a way that exploited some of its less endear-



EPPING BANDICOOTS
"WILL EAT THE LAWN WHEN VEGETABLE PATCH FAILS"
 Depredations to which Epping gardens have been subjected by a bandicoot invasion, which the local aldermen threaten to repel by direct action, is said to be due to the fact that the invaders have been starved out of other districts. Museum authorities say that when green vegetables fail, bandicoots will feed upon sweet potatoes, pumpkins or the lawn.



● Parks and Wildlife regional administration officer, Karyn Jowett with an armful of the chocolate Bilbies which are being promoted as an Australian alternative to the Easter Bunny. All proceeds from the sales are put back into the local National park facilities.

Victor Harbor's Department of Parks and Wildlife office in Ocean Street is revitalising its image.

Regional administration officer Karyn Jowett said the department realised a lot of people were not aware the service existed or that it had information, books, cards and toys relating specifically to wildlife found on

An item which is an undoubted favorite at present is the Easter Bilby — a chocolate treat brought out by the Department of Parks and Wildlife as an alternative to the Easter Bunny. A small Australian marsupial, the Bilby (also known as the long-eared bandicoot) looks quite similar to the common rabbit when it is huddled up.

ABOVE LEFT: The greater bilby (*Macrotis lagotis*), with its outsized, rabbit-like ears. **ABOVE RIGHT:** There was an attempt to market the bilby as an Australian alternative to the Easter Bunny. **BELOW:** It was unlikely to catch on, as bandicoots not only destroyed crops and gardens but hosted a potentially deadly tick.

ing characteristics. First, Dooley would need to contend with any pre-existing ideas of the bandicoot in Britain. For despite living on the opposite side of the world, the antipodean creature was present in British culture. A puppet troupe performed *Bandicoot's Surprise* during the autumn of 1996 in the Bedfordshire village of Cardington. Six years earlier, a reviewer called a show written and performed by Violet Philpott, entitled *Bandicoot and the Egg*, a "classic".⁴

Indeed, children's author and puppeteer Philpott had sowed the bandicoot in the national imagination with *Bandicoot and His Friends* (1976) two decades before the arrival of the Sony computer game character. Although it is possible to detect this soft image of the bandicoot in Britain before the hoax, it would be a mistake to think that it was a common perspective on the marsupial. Unlike Philpott's other creation, *Rainbow's Zippy*, the bandicoot was not regularly on television or indeed radio. Therefore, it did not take much for the cute bandicoot to give way to the invasive species.

"DESTRUCTIVE LITTLE BEASTS"

The framing of the bandicoot as a problem had its roots on the other side of the world. Australian efforts to defend the bandicoot, such as an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1962 and an attempt to replace the Easter Bunny with the Easter Bilby (one of the cuter varieties of the animal) thought to have originated in the mid-1970s, reveals how unpopular the animal was, even though, or perhaps because, it was protected by law.⁵

In its search for food, the bandicoot disturbed gardens and damaged crops. Farm-

BANDICOOTS ARE TICK-BEARERS TO SYDNEY DOGS

SYDNEY, Friday.

Sydney is threatened with a serious tick plague through an invasion of bandicoots, which are the chief hosts for dog ticks.

As bandicoots are protected animals, nothing can legally be done to check the invasion.

The Chief Guardian of Fauna (Mr. Griffiths) of the Chief Secretary's Department said the bandicoot was protected because it was a "unique species of native fauna."

USELESS TO MAN

A marsupial authority however said: "The bandicoot is useless to mankind and causes extensive damage by burrowing and eating grass roots, bulbs and tubers."

A Department of Agriculture official said, "If there were no bandicoots there would be practically no ticks—thus no dog losses no worries for parents."

Ticks have caused many deaths in N.S.W., ages of victims ranging from three months to 75 years.

In recent months they have killed many dogs, particularly on the North Shore.

ers considered the burrowing varieties as much of a nuisance on their land as moles. Bandicoots were more than pests. They hosted *Ixodes holocyclus*, the 'paralysis tick' that can harm humans, pets and livestock. In areas with a sizeable human population, like the North Shore area of Sydney, many resented these flighty nocturnal animals and there were calls for their eradication.

What better person to warn the British about this critter than Douglas Dooley, described as a retired Australian farmer. Perhaps there was a clue to the hoax hidden in plain sight in this name. At the time of the mock bandicoot invasion, a man named Douglas Dooley was a character animator for Blue Sky Studios in California. Two years later, he had a similar role at Pixar Animation Studios. In effect, a fictional namesake of this animator had animated the bandicoot in culture before it arrived on the screens of UK homes.

In the absence of statements from the usual authorities, an individual purportedly from Hunter Valley in New South Wales who asked Britons for their assistance in tracking bandicoots was a convincing figure and gave the impression that this was no trivial survey. This former farmer conveyed his authority and the gravity of the situation in statements like this: "We have reason to believe bandicoots are now at large in the United Kingdom... As with all wild animals, if you see one, do not approach it."⁶

Some newspapers rendered Dooley's "destructive little beasts" all the more unpleasant. The *Birmingham Mail* considered them "vicious and violent".⁷ This intensification of the threat posed by the bandicoots by the press offers an example of how 'collective

Bandicoots gatecrash the crypto-party



TOWARDS THE end of 1996, what appeared to be a major – if unusual – cryptozoological investigation was launched in Britain. The media were full of reports about the arrival on these shores of the Bandicoot Research Society, dedicated to seeking out colonies of bandicoots on British soil. The small, shrew-like rodents had, the Society's press releases informed the world, been seen in Coventry, Wolverhampton and Leicester, and the time was now ripe for a proper survey of these anomalous populations. With this in mind, the BRS was sending its top researchers to metaphorically ferret them out.

The story was picked up by Radio 4's *Today* programme; in a short, tongue-in-cheek piece, they interviewed FT's resident cryptozoology expert Dr Mike Dash, along with Rolf Harris, about the possibility of finding these tiny rodents anywhere in Britain. Rolf was inspired to spontaneously sing, hastily adapting his hit

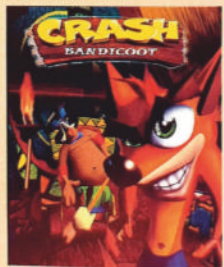
"Te Me Kangaroo Down, Sport" into "You Reasit Bandicoot". Dash resisted the temptation to sing, but as a good Fortean, argued that bandicoots possibly could survive in Britain, while remaining non-committal about whether or not there actually were any of the animals marauding around our countryside.

With the benefit of 20/20 hindsight, he was probably best to remain cautious, as the whole affair became very muddled soon afterwards. Investigation of the Bandicoot Research Society revealed that it apparently consisted entirely of one Doug Dooley, who proved to be stationed at a friend's flat in Fulham for the duration of his investigation. However, soon after Dooley's initial appearances, he vanished as mysteriously as he had appeared. His mobile phone has apparently been disconnected, and it seems that he has made no further attempt to contact the press. This sudden unavailability might reasonably lead one to suspect that "Dooley" might not have been who he claimed to be; it is a small matter to pay an actor for a week of PR.

Several experts confirmed that there have been no reports of bandicoots being sighted in Britain. London Zoo's Frank Wheeler, Head Keeper of Small Mammals, was adamant that no bandicoot had ever been sighted in Britain; indeed, he pointed out that it has been illegal to export bandicoots from Australia for some years now. A significant number of observers have pointed out that the appearance in Britain of the BRS was suspiciously serendipitous for Sony Computer Entertainment. By purest coincidence, the electronics giant had just begun a massive advertising campaign for their big PlayStation game for Christmas, *Crash Bandicoot*. Posters bearing slogans such as "A Bandicoot Is For Life, Not Just For Christmas" appeared around many cities almost simultaneously with the BRS's arrival.

While Sony continue to deny that they were responsible for bringing Dooley to Britain – assuming, of course, that he wasn't simply an actor – they did claim to have paid him £5,000 to help him in his quest for this latest mystery small mammal.

It should be noted that the television campaigns for the PlayStation frequently take the form of short pseudo-documentaries, with faked footage of "psychics" telekinetically spinning knives, or martial artists performing the feat of bicolation. It would be a small matter to take this one step further and send out a fake eccentric to gamer publicly. While, as Fortean, we occasionally feel a great affinity with hoaxes, we cannot help but think that PR stunts like these (and it seems fairly clear that this was some sort of obscure PR stunt) can only muddy the waters, and bring Fortean topics into even more disrepute with the media than is presently the case.



the *Today* programme on Radio 4 provided nationwide coverage of the BRS's request for information, so it is unlikely that the risk of attracting greater attention was a matter of concern for the hoaxers.

After the publication of adverts in the local press, however, one of the nationals published a feature on the animal. Four days before Christmas, the *Daily Telegraph* ran a half-page story by Graham Coster akin to an advertorial in the guise of an investigation into the possible links between the BRS and the forthcoming console game.¹³ Indeed, given the questions raised in 2015 about the *Telegraph's* close relationship with various companies, including HSBC and Sony Pictures, this feature on the real bandicoot may well have been a way to promote *Crash Bandicoot*.¹⁴

From a survey of local newspapers, it appears that *FT* and the *Daily Telegraph* underestimated the range of bandicoot sightings. Both publications only referred to the creature being spotted in the West and East Midlands. Yet the bandicoot invasion had a Welsh dimension that demonstrates how the hoax was not restricted to any single region.

In Swansea, for instance, three separate sightings took place within the space of two days of a BRS advert appearing in the *South Wales Daily Post*.¹⁵ One witness denied that they had mistaken a rat in a park for a bandicoot because the animal hopped away from them. Another thought they had seen a badger, but became convinced it was a bandicoot when it hopped. Based on these sightings, the BRS could have informed the public that if it looked like a familiar

animal but hopped, it was a bandicoot.

As the reports and rumours of sightings appeared in the press, official voices stressed that there was no hard evidence. Zoologists, Farmers' Unions and county councils called for calm. According to the journalist Mike Witchell, the adverts made people see bandicoots.¹⁶ Within two days of a newspaper mentioning bandicoots, members of the public began to report seeing them.

It would have been interesting to have seen how these voices of reason would have coped if the bandicoot misinformation campaign had lasted longer than it did. Even if many authorities dismissed the rumours, a wider, more determined, effort by the BRS would probably have furthered the invasion beyond this brief window and limited number of locations.

Flesh-and-blood bandicoots hardly registered in the press during 1997. The invasion had ended as suddenly as it had begun. It was as if the invasive species had transformed itself into pixels and swapped the countryside for game consoles. The whole affair was not really a panic, though it could have become one. Nonetheless, the bandicoot invasion provides a useful case study of what a hoax can achieve in a short time and with relatively little effort.

NOTES

- ¹ *Fortean Times* 98, May 1997, p.16; *Animals & Men* 12, 1997, p.17.
- ² Charles Mackay, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds Vol. I* (Richard Bentley, 1841), p. v.
- ³ Thomas H Sloane (ed.), *One Thousand One Papua New Guinean Nights: Folktales from Wantok Newspaper*

ABOVE LEFT: FT's report on the 'bandicoot invasion' in May 1997. ABOVE RIGHT: The PlayStation game *Crash Bandicoot*, which came out just after the Dooley/BRS PR stunt. BELOW LEFT: A review of the game in the *Daily Mirror* of 16 Nov 1996.

Vol II: 1986-1997 (Masali Press, 2001), pp.689, 750-751.

- ⁴ "The Cap and Bells puppets, presents *Bandicoot's Surprise*, at the Village Hall, Cardington", 19 Oct 1996, Bedfordshire Archives, Z 923/13/23; *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 3 Aug 1990, p.6.
- ⁵ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 Feb 1962, p.66; Ian Faithfull, "On the Origin, History and Significance of the Easter Bilby", *The Victorian Naturalist*, 117:2 (2000), pp.68-74.
- ⁶ *Dundee Courier*, 6 Nov 1996, p.14.
- ⁷ *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 1 Nov 1996, p.36.
- ⁸ Véronique Campion-Vincent, "Appearances of Beasts and Mystery-Cats in France", *Folklore* 103:2 (1992), pp.160-183.
- ⁹ *Cardiff Post*, 31 Oct 1996, p.38.
- ¹⁰ *Rutland Times*, 4 April 1997, p.14.
- ¹¹ *Hull Daily Mail*, 22 Oct 1996, p.32; *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 23 Oct 1996, p.29; *Bristol Evening Post*, 24 Oct 1996, p.40; *Nottingham Evening Post*, 25 Oct 1996, p.41; *Sandwell Evening Mail*, 25 Oct 1996, p.86.
- ¹² *Burton Mail*, 30 Oct 1996, p.4; *Manchester Evening News* 30 Oct 1996, p.20.
- ¹³ *Daily Telegraph*, 21 Dec 1996, Weekend Supplement, p.3.
- ¹⁴ <https://order-order.com/2015/02/18/leaked-memo-shows-telegraph-offered-sony-support-across-editorial/>
- ¹⁵ *South Wales Daily Post*, 28 Oct 1996, p.5.
- ¹⁶ *South Wales Daily Post*, 1 Nov 1996, p. 21.

◆ DR MIKE BENBOUGH-JACKSON is a senior lecturer in Modern British History at Liverpool John Moores University. He has published on a variety of subjects, some of which have touched on Fortean matters such as *Cardiganshire: The Concise History* (University of Wales Press, 2007) and *Cardiganshire and the Cardi c.1760-c.2000: Locating a place and its people* (University of Wales Press, 2011). Despite being around in the 1990s, he did not see a bandicoot.

Ghosts in the machines?

As Artificial Intelligence continues to hit headlines worldwide, creating scare-stories about mankind's inadvertent creation of dangerous new forms of silicon-based life, **SD TUCKER** reboots his system to ask the increasingly relevant question: can computers be haunted?

Computers are often said to possess a life of their own, with them frequently crashing, wiping files and generally doing whatever they feel like doing, irrespective of their owners' actual wishes. But, as Kier Starmer plans to make Britain an AI superpower, there are some people out there who think AI itself might well be just a cunning Satanic front for allowing age-old demons back into our unsuspecting human world in disguise (see **FT447:38-43**). Here are a few examples of spiritually malfunctioning operating systems which make even the ill-remembered Windows 8 seem benign by comparison.

ALEXA GOES EVIL

Amazon's popular voice-activated virtual assistant device Alexa has many potential functions – performing web-searches, forecasting the weather, playing your favourite songs and, of course, spying on you in your own home for illicit data-harvesting purposes. Clever Alexa may also soon perform acts of digital necromancy, with Amazon planning to add a function whereby voice-samples of dead relatives can be fed into its microphone, before on-board AI allows it to simulate their tones completely. Then, Little Johnny can be read his bedtime story by his dead grandma, ideally one by Edgar Allen Poe. In 2018, users worldwide reported Alexa emitting a “strange, spooky” laugh



of her own accord, causing people to feel their home had suddenly become haunted via the gadget for real; in truth, a programming flaw had made Alexa pick up verbal false positives which she incorrectly interpreted as the command ‘Alexa, laugh’. For users who wish to disturb others intentionally, a ‘Spooky Scream’ command for their obedient little digital demon is also now available.¹

THE LEVITATING LAPTOP

In 2015, a “very haunted” 2007 13-inch white Apple MacBook Pro laptop went up for sale on eBay from a vendor in Texas, who claimed to have accidentally left it out overnight in a graveyard during a Full Moon. Retrieving it, he and his wife were alarmed to find objects moving around in their home and occasionally even caught the MacBook itself levitating, whilst its desktop background spontaneously changed itself to an unspecified “scary photo”. Evidently, it had acquired its own poltergeist; the vendor uploaded a photo of the device grasping a pen between its closed lid and scribbling him a message on a sheet of printer-paper. “As such,” explained the seller, “I am given to believe

that this ghost may have lived in a time before computers” (shades of the infamous 1980s *Vertical Plane* case; see **FT108:40-44**), otherwise it could have just chosen to communicate via the miracle of word-processing. The story appeared to be a comical hoax, but the laptop was missing its boot-up CD and power-charger, so its owner had to sell it to the eBay public somehow – the top bid reached over \$6,000, more than four times the price of Apple's latest model MacBook at the time.²

DEMON EX MACHINA

In April 2000, evangelical Christian pastor Reverend Jim Peasboro of Savannah, Georgia, reportedly released a cautionary book, *The Devil in the Machine: Is Your Computer Possessed by a Demon?*, which explained that, ever since onboard memory-capacity had reached the appropriate levels back in 1985, Satan's hordes had been able to convert themselves into compressed digital file format and install themselves surreptitiously on your PC. These web-demons had subsequently influenced users' minds, forcing men to access pornographic websites to “witness unspeakable abominations”, and

LEFT: The “very haunted” Apple MacBook offered for sale on eBay in 2015.

women to frequent online chat-rooms and begin “spewing foul, debasing language they would never use normally”, ensuring eternal damnation. Peasboro himself caught a computer printing out reams of “gobbledygook” which he had examined by an expert, who found it was actually “a stream of obscenities written in a 2,800-year-old Mesopotamian dialect” by an ancient Middle Eastern devil. Fortunately, technicians could simply replace your haunted hard-drive and replace it with a clean, demonless one, for a reasonable fee. This story was repeated as solid fact in several media outlets, yet its original source was the *Weekly World News*, a notorious spoof US supermarket tabloid and former *FT* favourite, and Peasboro's book sadly does not seem to actually exist.³

SUPERNATURAL SOCIALS

Many people have been ‘ghosted’ by ex-lovers on social media, but persistent online legends abound about users' accounts being contacted by literal dead paramours. One such tale went viral in 2014, when a male user complained of how “My dead girlfriend keeps messaging me on Facebook. I've got the screenshots. I don't know what to do.” Supposedly, his girlfriend, Emily, a “total technophile” who “smelled of cinnamon” and “had really long toes, like a chimpanzee”, had died in a car-crash in 2012, leaving behind a still-active Facebook account. Unable to let go, her ex left this open, retaining personal access. Yet Emily seemed able to enter her old account too, posting continued messages. All security passwords were changed multiple times, yet emotive words like “FREEZING” continued to be posted nonetheless, triggering dreams of her cold, blue corpse lying at the scene of the accident. While screenshots were offered in support, we only have the word of



the alleged participants that such stories are true, and it seems more likely they simply represent a new form of semi-interactive, digital ghost story for the online age.⁴

PIXEL-PORTRAITS OF THE DEAD

'Instrumental Transcommunication' (ITC) is the name given to their craft by certain paranormal researchers who seek to contact the dead via modern electronic means. In 1993, an ITC-loving couple in Luxembourg, Maggy and Jules Harsch-Fischbach, claimed to have received messages from a dead 11-year-old French girl named Anne de Guigné via their PC and fax-machine. Simultaneously, German ITC fan Adolf Homes claimed identical messages from Anne appeared on his primitive Commodore 64 home-computer (mine just played *Manic Miner*). Having died young herself, Anne was deeply concerned about children dying in the world's many wars, and urged mankind to cease this senseless slaughter of the innocents. She also sent digital portraits of herself across the void, supposedly created for her in the afterlife by the talented wives of the Victorian-era French sci-fi writer Jules Verne and his compatriot the artist Edouard Manet. One particularly uncanny image somehow managed to record itself on Homes's TV set. Meanwhile, said the Harsch-Fischbachs, on 7 October 1995, "We received a letter from a man who died in 1912, and it wasn't the post office's fault." This was former New York-based journalist Arthur Beckwith, who typed his communiqué on the couple's computer screen, explaining that his rather niche role in the Beyond was to subscribe to the pair's ITC fanzines, assess their contents and report back to his fellow ghosts upon their quality.⁵

ET EMAILS

Extraterrestrials have also used computers to contact mankind, as seen in the saga of CHANI (Channelled Holographic Network Interface), said to have been created by secretive elements from the US Deep State in a CERN-like particle-collider facility located somewhere deep underground in South Africa. Here, a special computer was built, facilitating contact



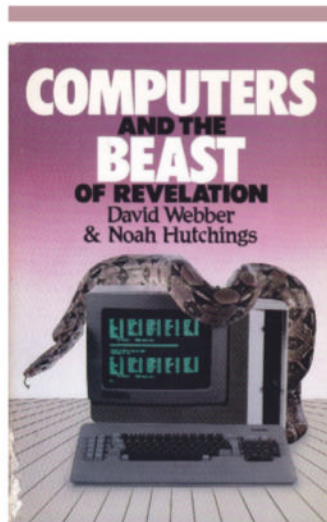
ABOVE: One of the Harsch-Fischbach's messages from the dead; it was actually actress Linda Hamilton in the 1986 film *King Kong Lives*, as demonstrated by Brazilian researcher Alexandre de Carvalho Borges.

with an interdimensional, inter-planetary entity from another version of our own Solar System, who warned that one day soon our twin parallel universes would violently collide, triggering catastrophe. The entity – assigned the task of talking with Earth as part of an alien PhD project! – typed out a series of poorly-spelled, baby-talk messages and e-mailed them across to the CHANI team. Our Moon was an evil artificial mood-altering device which kept mankind in mental chains and ought to be destroyed, the ET said, while Earth itself was hollow and full of lizard-men, and the most intelligent Earthlings were actually dolphins, who had once possessed legs and inhabited solid ground. The entity provided chilling predictions about the deaths of Nelson Mandela and Margaret Thatcher, and even warned of a forthcoming "Japan warring thing" and "crash of plane Europe people", but due to certain confusions was unable to provide the precise years these events would actually occur in, thus rendering the forecasts wholly worthless. Communication with the quasi-illiterate being finally ceased in 1999, after the system's software was updated to cope with the Millennium Bug, accidentally making the mega-computer incompatible with the alien Internet.⁶

THE EU'S BEAST

During the 1970s, certain hardline US evangelicals became paranoid about the introduction of the global barcode-scanning system, first used to sell a bar of Juicy Fruit chewing-gum in Ohio in 1974.

Earth was hollow and full of lizard-men and dolphins once possessed legs



Was this the dreaded 'Mark of the Beast' warned about in the Bible, a sign of the Antichrist without which it would become impossible to buy or sell any goods? To administer this system, the Antichrist would inevitably need an all-powerful computer, and whispers spread that the European Union (then still known as the 'European Common Market') had created just such a device, a gigantic machine dubbed 'The Beast', hidden away in a Brussels basement. The Beast had the capacity to tattoo every human on Earth with their own unique invisible barcode on their forehead,

the true '666', allowing them to be monitored and identified at all times by transforming everyone into a living, walking, credit card. The myth seemingly originated with an Oklahoma-based regional Christian radio station before being spread by David Webber and Noah Hutchings, co-authors of alarmist eschatological books like *The Computers Are Coming* and *Computers and the Beast of Revelation*. A suspiciously similar-sounding barcode-imprinting supercomputer also appeared in Christian novelist Joe Musser's 1970 thriller *Behold a Pale Horse*, the book later being turned into a movie. As a PR stunt, fake newspapers advertising the alleged existence of the film's evil computer were produced and given to cinema-goers, apparently leading certain evangelical newspapers to reprint the 'news' themselves as being actual fact.⁷ The EU may indeed be the work of Satan to many Eurosceptic voters across the Continent, but not for these precise reasons.

NOTES

- 1 www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/jun/23/amazon-alexa-could-turn-dead-loved-ones-digital-assistant; www.theverge.com/circuitbreaker/2018/3/7/17092334/amazon-alexa-devices-strange-laughter; www.amazon.co.uk/Vifopex-Corp-Spooky-Scream/dp/B01NORWJX
 - 2 <https://abcnews.go.com/US/haunted-macbook-auction-ebay/story?id=28893568>
 - 3 www.theregister.com/2000/03/10/us_preacher_finds_demonpossession_pcs/
 - 4 www.reddit.com/r/nosleep/comments/29kd1x/my_dead_girlfriend_keeps_messaging_me_on_facebook/
 - 5 <https://noblesavageworld.com/2011/12/17/the-human-story-10-the-afterlife-experience-of-anne-de-guigne/>; <https://macyafterlife.com/substantiation/>; www.alemdacien-cia.com/
 - 6 www.scribd.com/doc/292733130/The-Chani-Project
 - 7 <https://anthropologie.kunstkamera.ru/files/pdf/eng012/panchenko2.pdf>; www.zdnet.com/article/it-myths-does-the-beast-of-brussels-know-everything-about-us/
- ♦ SD TUCKER writes FT's Strange Statesmen series and is the author of numerous books on fortune topics. His latest, *Hitler's & Stalin's Misuse of Science*, is out now.

The Devereaux Abduction

ANDY OWENS revisits a British multi-witness case involving alleged alien abduction and missing time, and presents the full story of the hypnotic regression undergone by Rachel Devereaux

In my letter 'Alien Abductions' (FT447:61) I wrote about one of the most convincing cases of alleged abduction and missing time involving four people and including two young children, as featured in the documentary *The Real 4400*. (The family were re-interviewed years later for the documentary *Shaun Ryder on UFOs* and all recounted the same details.)

Rachel Devereaux was regressed by hypnotherapist Steve Burgess and an edited version appeared in *The Real 4400*. I contacted Mr Burgess requesting the full transcript, and he kindly supplied it.

I told FT readers that it was on my blog 'Spooky Vocation', which it was at the time I wrote it, but by the time the letter was printed in FT, I had removed it, deciding to limit the blog to my personal experiences of ghost hunting.

So, printed below is the whole session.

Steve Burgess explained: "In 2005, I was contacted by a researcher from a TV company who had heard about my experiences as a regression therapist. They were producing a documentary for Sky TV which was to be called *The Real 4400*. This was about several people who claimed that they had 'missing time' experience as a result of alien contact or abduction. They asked me to regress a lady who felt that, together with her family, she had been abducted, but none of them had any memories of it.

"Each of them felt strange and



felt that something had happened apart from them just seeing the UFO, but they didn't know what. In the weeks after the event, they all became increasingly troubled and upset by not knowing. It was as if they could sense something tangible, but which was just out of reach of their conscious minds. The boys had started suffering from anxiety attacks and sleep disturbances, including nightmares."

To interject here: hypnotic regression is a contentious area, as it is often questioned whether the lost memory of a missing time experiencer can be accurately retrieved using regression, and if the hypnotist may influence the memory in any way.

However, in his forthcoming book *The Adventures of a Hypnotherapist*, in a chapter entitled 'The Real X-Files', Burgess explains: "I should state that

LEFT AND OPPOSITE: Hypnotherapist Steve Burgess arrives at Rachel Devereaux's North Yorkshire farmhouse and performs a hypnotic regression on her.

when I'm doing regression work, I am always cautious not to lead my client or implant anything that could cause me to be accused of leading them in any way. The information should come from the client spontaneously without any suggestions from the therapist. This is especially true of extra-terrestrial regressions. I do not agree with the client before or during the regression that what they believe they experienced actually happened.

"It is perfectly possible for a person in trance to make something up and imagine things that are not real, and this is particularly the case if the hypnotist unwittingly (or even knowingly) leads the client or corroborates with them.

"The therapist should be completely neutral and use what we call 'clean language'. Only after I have observed them in a regression session and heard what they have to say and how they experience it, do I make a judgement as to the veracity of their memories. In other words, did they really experience the events from the past, or did they just imagine them? There are certain things that I look for during the regression which indicate to me that it was real or imagined memory.

"One common feature of ET regressions is that the person who has had the contact... has their conscious memories wiped... so they can't remember anything clearly afterwards. However, it appears that they can't wipe the subconscious which seems to be a deeper store of everything that has ever happened to us. I liken it to a vast computer bank. This means that hypnotic trance is an ideal medium, provided it is done properly and 'cleanly', to unlock or retrieve the consciously forgot-



ten memories.

"I arrived at a lonely farmhouse in North Yorkshire belonging to Rachel Devereaux and her family. I was not allowed to contact them (beforehand) because the producer of the programme was worried that if I spoke to Rachel in advance that I might in some way implant something into her mind that could contaminate the evidence that might come through during the regression. This was fair enough, I thought, as I didn't want to be involved in anything that could spoil the truthfulness of the session. However, I think he was taking it a bit far when, as soon as I got out of my car, he started filming me and he didn't let Rachel and I have any time together on our own. Talk about having a suspicious mind!

"Rachel was understandably nervous, but over a cup of tea (every mouthful dutifully filmed by Mr Suspicious the producer)... she told me the family's story.

"With the TV lights on us and the camera recording the session in her lounge, I took Rachel into trance and regressed her back to the day in question. She firstly talked through leaving the restaurant and getting into the car to drive home, and then began to remember the incident in more depth."

Rachel says:

"There are bright lights shining all around and into the car and a spaceship is alongside us. We're all shocked but I can feel a blissful feeling; I feel euphoric."

She started to cry, but they were tears of happiness. After a few moments, she calmed down and continued:

"They've taken us up in the car to their spacecraft and we're in a dark room above the Earth. I feel happy. There are no walls, just black everywhere. Like standing in the middle of space. There's a shield in front with light coming from behind it. I know that there's someone or something on the other side of it, but I can't see what it is. We all



stand in a circle facing outwards and holding hands. We're being spoken to telepathically; they're telling me we are safe, and no harm will come to us. There's a big bright light right in front of me, high up. It's watching what the little ones are doing. The small lights are going round and looking at us and talking to each other... as if they're inspecting us or scanning us. They start with me

and the two smaller lights are close to my face and my head... Every time I feel worried the big light comes to my forehead to re-assure me telepathically. The two smaller lights are communicating with each other by beams of light; there are no sounds. Now the two lights have moved behind me to

inspect the boys. Both of the boys are laughing; they say it feels like they are being tickled. They think that the boys are funny. The children are laughing; they're really giggling."

Rachel was smiling and laughing at this point, but then she

"Both the boys are laughing; they say it feels like they are being tickled."

became anxious as she started to cry. She said:

"I'm scared for the children, but the lights are there and they're telling me that it's fine and they're not going to hurt them: 'They're your children.' The main light has come back and it's re-assuring me."

Once more she relaxed and let go of the tension. She was silent for a while before she continued:

"The room is totally dark now, but I know that one of the beings is in front of me in the darkness and I'm straining my eyes to see it. It knows that I'm trying to see it. I sense that it's quite small and about two feet in front of me.

"Now it's totally light again with bright light all around and we're back in the car; we float back down to the ground. The car has also been up in the air, with a road underneath it that doesn't exist. I think we've been about

one hundred feet up. Now I'm driving the car with the lights around us and I feel very sad that they have to go. The lights move off very fast and disappear. I feel sad; I didn't want them to go."

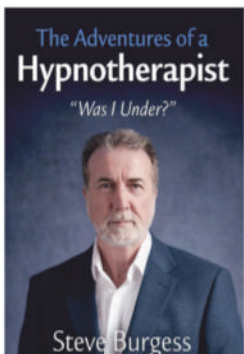
Steve Burgess says: "Rachel then talked through some of her conscious memories of driving home with all of them excitedly discussing seeing the light alongside the car and then shooting off into the distance. She came out of trance both amazed and relieved. She was surprised at the things she had remembered but with a feeling of relief that she now had confirmation that something out of the ordinary had indeed happened that day.

"After we finished filming the regression, I was interviewed on camera by the producer who asked me my thoughts about what I had witnessed. I told him that I was 90% convinced that Rachel's memories were true and real. Nowadays, with hindsight, I am 99% convinced. All of the signs I look for in a typical regression session were there. But more than that, I find it very difficult to believe that this 35-year-old woman, her two young sons and her mum, were concocting this whole UFO story for some unknown reason. Why would they do that? They had no benefits to going public that they'd had an alien abduction experience. The whole family were emotionally disturbed by what had happened, and I don't believe that the children (or any of the family) were fabricating things. I believe that they had contact with ETs that day and would stake my reputation on that being a fact."

Many thanks to Steve Burgess.

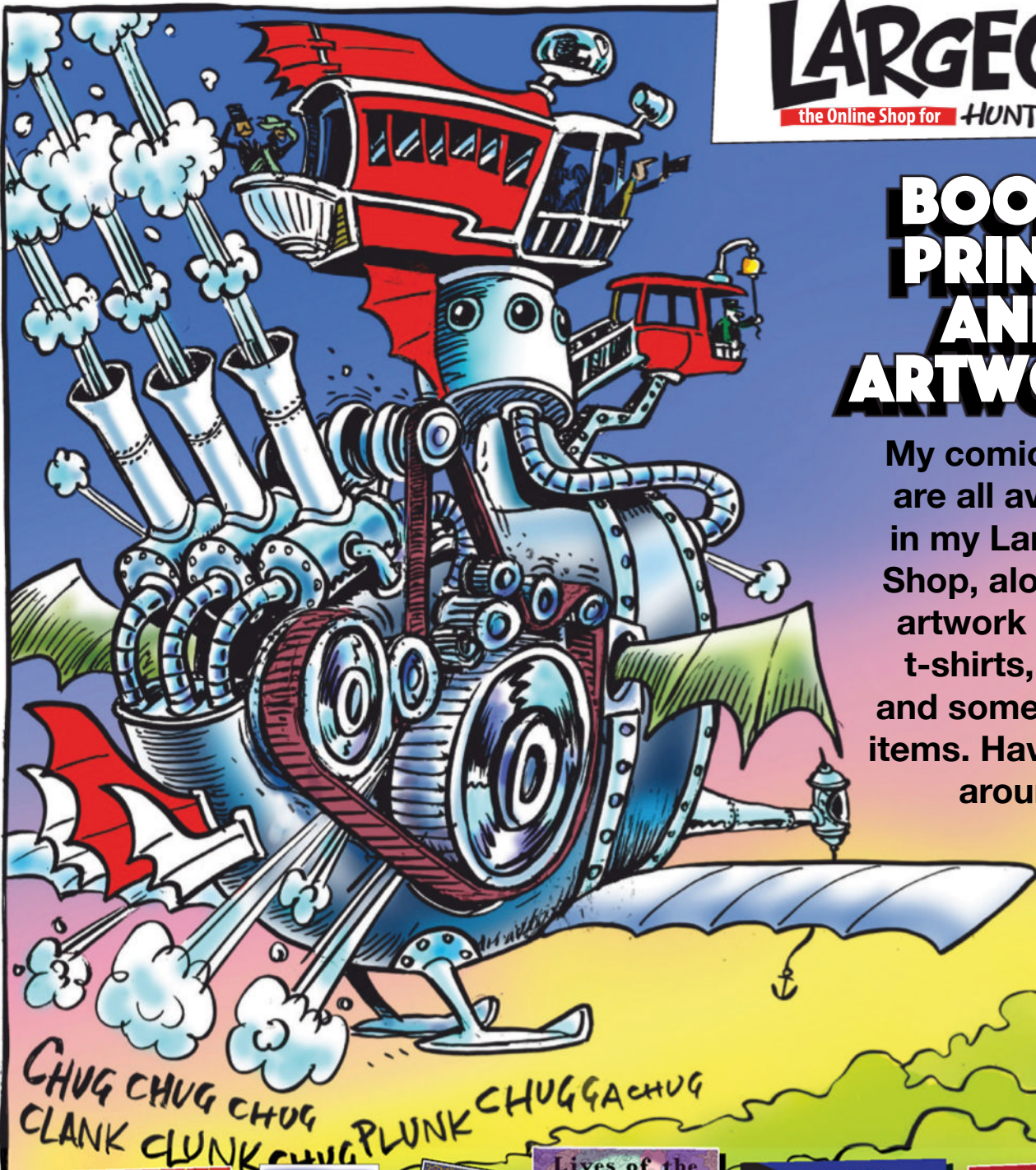
The Real 4400 can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IwkEm9Bz5IY>

♦ ANDY OWENS investigates reports of mysterious happenings and writes the blog Spooky Vocation (In Search of Ghosts and Stranger Things). His books include *Yorkshire Stories of the Supernatural* (1999), *The Police and the Paranormal* (2011) and *Ghosts* (2021). Details at owensandy.com



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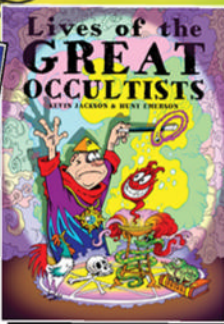
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Main image is from Phenomenomix: "In a Thousand Years."



Wired by coffee and a desire to know

The 17th-century Robert Hooke's rigorous but open-minded attitude to scientific enquiry and his refusal to dismiss the 'mad, foolish and Phantastick' are reminiscent of Charles Fort's intellectual curiosity

Robert Hooke's Experimental Philosophy

Felicity Henderson

Reaktion Books 2024

Hb, 224pp, £17.95, ISBN 9781789149548

The structure of frozen urine, observing the lunar eclipse, strange remains discovered in a dead aristocrat's body and a one-wheeled Chinese vehicle. Not newspaper cuttings sent to this issue of FT, but a range of the topics under discussion at early meetings of the Royal Society.

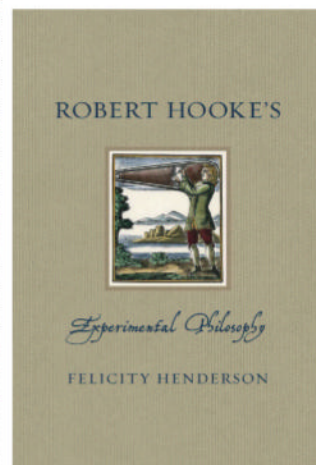
These examples give a sense of how everything appeared to be of interest to the members of England's first scientific society, founded in 1660 to "promote the study of the natural world through experiments and observation".

The Society's self-styled "experimental philosophers" adopted the motto of the new institution as *Nullius in Verba* (roughly, "Take no-one's word for it") to emphasise how they needed to observe for themselves claims made about the natural world. However, as Felicity Henderson argues here, only one of the Society's luminaries tried to set down the methods that experimental practice should follow. Not one of the many ennobled gentlemen of the Society but one of its lesser social lights and, one who, as the Society's Chief Experimenter, was called on to comment upon new claims to knowledge.

Pioneer of microscopy, Surveyor to the City of London, Chief Experimenter to the Royal Society. Despite these achievements and accolades, Robert Hooke (1635-1703) has not been well-served by posterity, often caricatured as a cantankerous and argumentative loner, over-

shadowed by the clear-sighted genius of Isaac Newton. Henderson is not the first historian to reevaluate Hooke, but she is the first to read his life through his "experimental method". Rather typically given his myriad interests, Hooke never set this out in one (published) volume, but in a range of personal notebooks. Even so, as Henderson admits, it remained incomplete. What does survive, however, offers a unique insight into the thinking of a founding member of the Royal Society.

So, what was this method setting out to do? To Hooke it was "an Art of directing the Mind in



the search after Philosophical Truths": a way to train himself to be ready for philosophical speculation. For Henderson, it offers a means of understanding the range of Hooke's disparate interests and a way of interpreting his restless desire for practical knowledge.

Hooke's ideas were by no means those of an inveterate tinkerer, storing away his findings for his own sake. For Henderson, Hooke's desire to know more was motivated by sharing his newly-found knowledge with

The Royal Society's motto was Nullius in Verba (roughly, "Take no-one's word for it")

others. Take his revelatory *Micrographia* (1665) – the microscopic worlds Hooke described and illustrated there were not his own fiefdoms. His book gives detailed descriptions on how to construct a microscope so its readers could visit these wonderlands too.

Rather than being the cantankerous caricature some have supposed, Henderson's Hooke is fundamentally optimistic: eager for the "mechanical knowledge" advanced through new technologies like the microscope to be put to use for the benefit of humanity. In Hooke's philosophy, with the right technology, anything might be possible, even "the hearing of Noises made as far off as the Planets".

Open minds were also necessary; for Hooke, if those who denounced ideas that might first appear "mad, foolish and Phantastick" were heeded, knowledge would never advance. With such a positive attitude to the seemingly outré and unconventional, it suggests Hooke to have some of the intellectual curiosity of Charles Fort himself.

It's a reminder too – if we ever needed it – that the history of science is not a pure, straightforward path of discovery, cut by clear-sighted paragons of rationality.

To emphasise his desire for practical knowledge, Henderson widens her enquiry beyond Hooke's circle at the Royal Society to his wider social milieu, depicting him both as a

garrulous patron of the city's new coffee shops and as an inquisitive visitor to its artisanal workshops. The knowledge he acquired on trade and building materials, for example, further inspired Hooke's creative mind. Henderson's non-stop Hooke then – wired by both coffee and a desire to know – emerges as a mirror of Restoration London itself, rebuilding at a rapid pace after the devastation of the Great Fire.

The Hooke that emerges from Henderson's enlightening book, however, is a restless figure of polymathic interests, but one whose methodology could create its own problems.

Hooke's "experimental method" prepared his mind to understand the workings of what he believed to be a fundamentally mechanical universe, one where everything – from the brain to the Solar System – followed the same physical laws. On such terms, everything could be understood by Hooke – if only he had the time to piece it all together. It's notable then that his peers saw fit to follow his example; as Henderson notes, papers written by Hooke were still being read to the Royal Society more than a decade after his death.

Perhaps one slight disappointment is Henderson's decision to omit some of the more unusual sides of Hooke's behaviour, such as his habit of recording his ejaculations in his personal notebooks with a special symbol – arguably the first diarist to record sexual activity in this way. However, this is a small quibble about a perceptive and absorbing book that reassesses Hooke's life, and shows how his methodology influenced his peers, and how it can inform us still.

Ross MacFarlane

★★★★★

No face on Mars

Fabulous photos, but an approach that's as dry as the planet's surface, says **Jerry Glover**

Mars

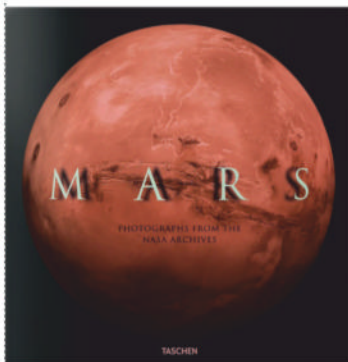
Photographs from the NASA Archives

Nikki Giovanni et al

Taschen 2024

Hb, 340pp, £50, ISBN 97836586467

Who remembers when the *Sunday Sport* put the Face on Mars image on its front page? The implication that Mars once had a civilization felt like the most incredible discovery ever (and wasn't it also discussed on Radio Four's *Today* programme?) In hindsight, it was consistent with the imaginative allure Mars has always held for us; our era's Martian canals.

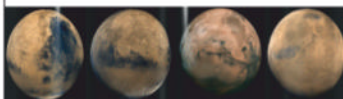


Despite upholding the fallacy that Elon Musk is "the founder" of PayPal and Tesla Inc. and giving a free pass to his possibly over-optimistic vision of a Mars colony, the opening essay on two centuries of Mars culture encapsulates its allure along with paintings, photographs and movie posters inspired by it. The next essay by a NASA Former Chief Scientist on the search for life was written shortly after the Perseverance rover landed in February 2021 and therefore lags well behind in light of subsequent discoveries.

The content is thereafter divided into Reconnaissance, Circumnavigation and Landfall sections, illustrated with historic photographs from NASA's missions. The picture selection is overwhelmingly safe and stately, skewing towards wide landscapes, selfies of mission vehicles, and maybe too many shots of

their wheel tracks. Wonderful panoramic fold-outs outnumber scant shots of surface details: curious geology, anomalies. Apart from the Viking mission "face" image, other fascinating images are therefore omitted, for example the "crinoid", the "doorway", "bones", "skulls", "insectoids", "vertebrae", "snakes", "pipes", "spacecraft wreckage", "fungi", or other fossil-like shapes, some of which are the subject of scientific papers. Was there ever any chance of there being a section couched thus: "These images are pareidolia effects that look like signs of life, nevertheless they're unusual and worth investigating further"? There's only the original "face" image for more foretelling interest and not even the subsequent, clearer images of the feature. And yet there's acres of gorgeous dunes, canyons, craters, and horizons, with and without the rovers, which are also shown under construction on Earth. The images are served by minuscule grey text on a black background, skirting the edges of legibility.

Less a book about the pure mystery and wonder of Mars, then, as about Mars culture and missions in their historic context. By including two aspects that could easily be expanded into their own volumes, and given an approach to the subject



that's about as dry as the planet's surface, the work feels compromised, even while the individual images are fabulous and generously-sized. If the editorial choices were half as bold as Mars's explorers this would be an exceptionally interesting book and not just merely very beautiful and quite interesting.

★★★



The New Witches of the West

Tradition, Liberation and Power

Ethan Doyle White

Cambridge Elements 2024

Pb, 80pp, £17, ISBN 9781009472821

Ethan Doyle White's *The New Witches of the West* is a slim but densely packed account of "modern religious Witchcraft". It offers a valuable scholarly history from the mid-20th century to the present day, with an emphasis on the United Kingdom and North America.

Doyle White opens with the question: "What is it about the idea of witchcraft and the identity of the witch that appeals to people living in modern Western societies?" Using distinct traditions, key practitioners and scholarly perspectives he explores how Wicca, Traditional Witchcraft, Reclaiming practices and Luciferian traditions, among others, are shaped by social, political and cultural contexts.

The book is organised thematically through three chapters: Tradition, Liberation and Power. These emphasise commonalities, and encourage an understanding of Witchcraft as radical and progressive, to demonstrate its distinctiveness from New Age practices and other New Religious Movements.

In Tradition, distinct trajectories and micro-histories are traced that connect mid-20th-century Gardnerian Wicca with wider practices and practitioners, interconnections with feminism and newer relationships with diasporic religions. Doyle White demonstrates how Witchcraft is always being made and remade in reference to different kinds of pasts, combining magical and religious histories with varying commitments to empirical evidence and scholarly interpretations.

The label "modern religious Witch" is inspired by Ronald Hutton's four categories in *Witch* (2017), to describe those who self-identify as witches to describe their own rituals and spiritualities. This classification blurs somewhat in Liberation, where the Witch as "countercultural rebel" draws on feminisms

and queer politics to challenge social norms and heteronormativity. The appeal of Witchcraft to those who are marginalised is a central theme.

The final section on Power turns to magic. While recognising this is a problematic concept for Euro-American scholars with roots in coloniality and evolutionary theories, Doyle White identifies a strand of "Western learned magic" drawing on rich inspirations from antiquity and early modern grimoires, viewed through Enlightenment science and psychology. Combined with the influence of Aleister Crowley's "magick", this final chapter shows how Witchcraft can be deployed as a form of activism. Sometimes by self-identified practitioners, such as Starhawk's continued political engagements over the last four decades; at other times more secular usage, such as the mass protests organised in 2016 by the Witches of Instagram to protect the US from Donald Trump.

In answer to his initial inquiry Doyle White posits that there is no single reason why people become Witches today. If this conclusion is a little disappointing, then it is equally unsurprising given its expansive scope. Doyle White predicts that while fundamentalist religions loom on the periphery, modern religious Witchcraft will be increasingly progressive.

This is a highly readable book that provides a succinct and detailed account of modern Witchcraft traditions.

Helen Cornish

★★★★

Spielberg

A Retrospective

Richard Schickel

Thames & Hudson 2024

Pb, 320pp, £28, ISBN 9780500298145

After the huge success of *Jaws*, Steven Spielberg virtually had a blank cheque to direct any film he wanted. He chose to make *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (CE3K). UFOs fascinated him; at the age of 18, he had made a 150-minute-long, 8mm film, *Firelight*, that centred on a small town attacked by aliens. Now he had the chance and resources to make the UFO epic that he always imagined.

CE3K cemented his box-office appeal but his next project, *1941*,



was a rare flop. It is loosely based on the panic caused by the fear of Japanese attacks in 1942, that produced the zoot suit riots and the so-called “Battle of Los Angeles” where anti-aircraft guns fired at what transpired to be an imaginary Japanese air raid.

With *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Spielberg got back into his critical and blockbusting stride, and with George Lucas created the Indiana Jones franchise that made alternative archaeology adventurous and sexy.

E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial made us see the world through the eyes of a peace-loving, ecologically aware alien who wants to go home. It was not until 22 years later with *War of the Worlds* that he returned to an alien-themed movie with a much darker edge.



Some UFO commenters, and even President Reagan, have voiced the opinion that *CE3K*

and *E.T.* were produced to get the public used to the idea of alien disclosure, but in this retrospective Spielberg merely states: “If you believe, it’s science fact; if you don’t believe, it’s science fiction. I’m an agnostic between the two beliefs, so for me it’s science speculation.”

Throughout his long career Spielberg has mined our deepest fears, from the truck in *Duel*, the shark in *Jaws*, alien visitations, the horrors of war to the rampaging dinosaurs in his *Jurassic Park* franchise.

Richard Schickel’s book includes first-person interviews with Spielberg and 400 illustrations from the Steven Spielberg Archive that tell how these films came about, their production and how audiences and critics responded to them.

It is a large-format glossy coffee table book, yet Schickel does not, when necessary, flinch from making critical comments. For example, he calls *Hook* “a handsome, miscalculated film, essentially dead on arrival at the theatre”.

A full filmography as well as a long list of the films he has produced – for example, *Poltergeist*, *Gremlins*, *Back to the Future*, *Harry and the Hendersons*, **batteries not included*, *Men in Black*, *Cowboys & Aliens* – all

show the impact Spielberg has had on infiltrating forteen-themed movies into popular culture and our imagination.

Nigel Watson

★★★★★

Music from Elsewhere

Haunting Tunes From Mythical Beings, Hidden Worlds and Other Curious Sources

Doug Skinner

Strange Attractor Press 2024

Pb, 272pp, £21, ISBN 9781913689216

Doug Skinner’s collection of essays on various forms of “anomalous” music begins – in Chapter 0 – with “Music That Isn’t There”. The opening example of Alphonse Allais is fascinating: a 19th-century French comic writer, Allais’s pre-Surrealist silent composition, “Funeral march composed for the funeral of a great deaf man”, prefigured the work of John Cage in the 20th century.

Allais was a journalist, not a musician, and throughout the book’s eight chapters we are introduced to music produced by both musicians and non-musicians, humans and animals, and earthly and unearthly beings. Although Skinner professes a European focus, there are also nods to traditions further afield.

Fans of folklore will enjoy his chapter “On the Music of the Ultraterrestrials”, covering fairy music as well as the water-horse lullabies of Skye, the latter an intriguing example of songs about ultraterrestrial creatures.

Some of the folklorish music-makers within can probably be guessed at, such as the music heard in the famed Versailles time slip, or the large number of phantom drummers that seem to populate British folklore (my middle school was reputed to have one, to be heard in a dank corridor beneath the swimming pool).

Like many examples in the book, though, the phantom drummers left me wanting more (why are there so many tales of phantom drummer boys?). Each chapter is relatively short and

sometimes the lack of background context or in-depth analysis makes these brief explorations on a theme seem rather list-like. Skinner is clearly a master of his source material, with expansive knowledge of the topic, but less well-versed readers may find themselves at sea in the passing mentions of specific novels or religious movements, or technical musical details.

For the reader of music, though, the second half of the book will be much enjoyed, with notations for the music discussed included on different paper. Like many of Strange Attractor’s recent offerings, the book is beautifully produced with good quality images, although I found the font very difficult when differentiating between italics and regular text – a minor point, perhaps, but one that led to frequent re-reading and checking of sentences.

The book’s slightly “grab bag” approach will be a strength for many readers: the chapters can be read in any order, with a notebook and pen to hand to record such enticing gems as contactee Howard Menger’s 1957 album *Authentic Music From Another Planet*, or the 1980 track by Vivenus, “It’s Not Odd to Vote for God” (the latter sadly lost, another type of “music that isn’t there”).

Jennifer Wallis

★★★

In Poe’s Wake

Travels in the Graphic and the Atmospheric

Jonathan Elmer

University of Chicago Press 2024

Pb, 224pp, £18, ISBN 9780226833491

This book explores the varied afterlives of American Gothic writer Edgar Allan Poe, exploring a range of adaptations across different art forms, but persuasively arguing for a more diffuse influence of Poe’s mordant moods and a consistent tendency to conflate Poe’s sensation fictions with his sensational and dissolute life.

There are four lengthy chapters, two on the “graphic”, two on the “atmospheric”. The first focuses on Poe’s many illustrators, including, in a 19th-century France enamoured of Poe’s bohemian life as a *poète maudit*, artists such as Gustav Doré, Édouard Manet and Odilon Redon.

The second chapter thinks about the graphic in Poe in the sense of depictions of extreme violence on film, starting from the 1909 biopic *Edgar Allan Poe* by DW Griffiths and Alice Guy-Blaché’s version of *The Pit and the Pendulum* (1910), all the way to the recent conflation of Poe’s life and art in the Hollywood horror, *The Pale Blue Eye* (2022).

Elmer often works by association, picking up, for instance, on the disembodied eyes that float in Odilon Redon’s illustrations and pursuing the trope up to the ruinous damage to eyes in films of Italian horror maestro, Dario Argento, including his loosely Poe-inspired section of *Two Evil Eyes* (1990).



The third and fourth chapters try to fix down the elusive atmosphere evoked in Poe, with one chapter on sound

and one on voice.

Chapter 3 follows adaptations of “The Fall of the House of Usher”, which Poe describes as permeated by “a pestilent and mystic vapour” saturated with dread. There’s a strong section on Claude Debussy’s opera of “The Fall of the House of Usher”, unfinished at his death in 1918. While Lou Reed’s staging and recording of “The Raven” appears, there’s sadly no place for the baroque opera of “Usher” by British prog rock veteran Peter Hammill.

The final chapter looks at radio adaptations and uncanny voices, including a Boris Karloff broadcast of “The Tell-Tale Heart” in 1941. The most forteen section is about the poems Poe dictated to the Spiritualist medium Lizzie Doten and the hoax “lost” poems of Poe concocted by James Whitcomb Riley in 1877. They were accepted by adherents because they certainly *sounded* like Poe.

Elmer, an American literature professor, has written a lucid and authoritative drift through these adaptations, although non-specialists may tire a little of diversions into the philosophy of Heidegger or Gaston Bachelard. I left with a long wish-list of things to chase down, though, which is usually the sign of a useful book.

Roger Luckhurst

★★★★★

Laying a story to rest

Mike Dash finds that reports of mass graves at a former Canadian residential school had all the hallmarks of a classic moral panic

Grave Error

How the Media Misled Us (and the Truth about Residential Schools)

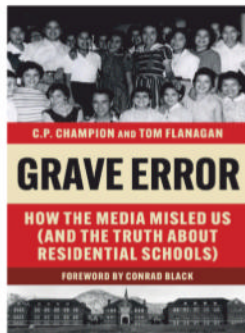
eds. CP Champion & Tom Flanagan

True North/Dorchester Books 2023

Pb, 343pp, £12.60, ISBN 9798867599317

On the Whitsun holiday weekend of 1964, riots broke out along the seafronts of British holiday resorts from Bournemouth to Margate. The combatants were several thousand Mods and Rockers, members of rival youth subcultures with differing tastes in music, fashion and personal transport – though they struck many of their elders as equally alien and frightening.

In retrospect, the events weren't *that* alarming; though there were dozens of arrests, no one was killed. But that was not



the way the papers saw it. Leading with screaming headlines, one assured its readers that the younger generation was transforming into “mutated locusts”.

Before long, the battles of the Mods and Rockers had turned into a full-fledged moral panic, the first to be fully documented in real time – see Stanley Cohen's *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1972). Cohen nailed down the features of a sort of societal convulsion of great interest to fortune tellers. Phantom attacker scares, reports of Satanic abuse, mysterious waves of child abductions committed by clowns: all fit the bill of moral panics. So, according to the editors of the cleverly-titled *Grave Error*, do reports of the discovery of hun-

dreds of unmarked graves dotted around the grounds of “residential schools” – a specifically Canadian sort of church-run educational establishment which took in, housed and taught indigenous children.

Moral panics have a lot in common. They typically stem from trigger events, reflect and give shape to deep-rooted fears, and are amplified by “concerned” parties that use them to buttress their own social and political positions. Canada's residential schools affair mirrors these patterns, and the trigger event in this case was the announcement in May 2021 of the discovery of 215 apparent burials (identified by ground-penetrating radar) on land close to the Kamloops Residential School in British Columbia, which had operated between 1890 and 1978.

The story spread to other countries. One of many typical stories, in the *New York Times*, had the headline “Horrible History”: Mass Grave of Indigenous Children Reported in Canada”. The allegations were immediately accepted as true; Prime Minister Justin Trudeau ordered Canadian flags to be flown at half-mast to honour the “215 children whose lives were taken”. The Pope described it as “genocide”. Churches were burned down in protest.

This news tapped into existing concerns about the abuses that former pupils of such schools reported experiencing at the hands of staff. According to Champion (a prominent conservative journalist) and Flanagan (a political scientist), it also played into the hands of activists who saw Canada as a racist state, and the residential schools as tools of an oppressive government committed to the cultural genocide of the First Nations.

Make no mistake, then: this is a political book, a dispatch from the culture wars that comes with a preface by Conrad Black, best known for his former ownership of the *Daily Telegraph*. That may be enough to put off some potential purchasers, and it ought to be sufficient to encourage all

readers to work through the 18 widely varied essays it contains with their critical faculties switched on.

It remains the case, however, that the residential schools affair does contain worrying features. By far the most important is the way in which coverage of the Kamloops “grave finds” distorted actual evidence in ways that gave flight to a whole series of similar reports – even though no proof of any deaths had been produced, or has been supplied since then.

What the radar surveys revealed was evidence of disturbed patches of soil. These resemble disturbances made by gravedigging – but not one of them has been excavated and been shown to actually be a grave, much less to contain the body of a child. Add to that evidence the facts that known but disused graveyards already existed on some of the lands surveyed, and that indigenous children *did* die at such schools and were buried there (but of diseases such as TB, not provably as a result of abuse) and there is, at the very least, reason to suppose that the media rushed far too rapidly to judgement in running stories about “missing children” hidden in “mass unmarked graves”.

No graves, and no bodies, were ever found. It was later revealed that the orchard at Kamloops where the “graves” were supposedly found was actually the site of a septic field laid in 1924. Clay tiles would have been placed in the field at the depth of the disturbances identified by radar.

The residential schools panic has yet to play out in Canada, but the parallels that exist between its evidence and that for sightings of “phantom clowns” or mysterious drones in the night skies of New Jersey ought to give everybody pause for thought.

This book is a small press publication, and its look and feel reflect its origin. Most conspicuously and unfortunately, it lacks both illustrations and an index.

★ ★ ★ ★

25 True Ghost Stories

UK Encounters Told for the First Time by the Witness

PA Kerry

Independently published/Amazon 2024

Pb, 98pp, £9.50, ISBN 9798325833106

This book maintains a tradition of telling “true” ghost stories offering a sampler of first-hand accounts collected by its author. The alleged experiences date from 1942 onwards and occur mostly in the Midlands and Lincolnshire, plus some experiences of the author himself. Some would be potentially very interesting, including a battlefield sighting, a haunting at Glent-



worth Hall and reports of phantom pigs at a Nottinghamshire farm; but despite being billed as “spine chilling”, details sadly prove too sparse for serious researchers wishing to follow up the stories. Filtered as these stories are, the narratives provide less detail than most contributions to FT's “It happened to me” section. Many were collected years afterwards; two are identifiable as phantom hitchhiker lore and one as a variant of the “Busby Stoop” cursed chair.

About the story “The Cry of the Rooks”, a haunted outward-bound centre in Snowdonia built over Celtic burials, the author has apparently published a 120,000-word version elsewhere of how “ancient spirits would do everything in their power to bankrupt any business operated at the premises!”

The book is engaging as a collection of brief vignettes; but it's undermined by the author's enthusiasm for sensationalising material and adding lurid illustrations better fitting it all to the readers' experiences pages in publications like *Chat it's fate* or the 1970s and 1980s *Weekend Book of Ghosts*. However, I agree with him on the importance of preserving details of people's stories, even in fragmentary form.

25 True Ghost Stories might be recommended as a suitable book for children aged 11 or over except for the section on spectral sexual encounters and the unsuitability of one illustration.

Alan Murdie

★ ★



ALSO RECEIVED

WE LEAF THROUGH A SMALL SELECTION OF THE DOZENS OF BOOKS THAT HAVE ARRIVED AT FORTÉAN TOWERS IN RECENT MONTHS AND WERE LOST DOWN THE BACK OF SOFA...

Beyond Reasonable Doubt

Philip Mantle & Irena McCammon Scott

Flying Disk Press, 2023

Pb, £14.95, 414pp, ISBN 9798850206130

A personal project by Philip Mantle has been to bring together the large amount of material that has accumulated around the famous close encounter/abduction case from 11 October 1973, in which two fishermen – Calvin Parker and Charles Hickson – were floated through the air by disturbingly alien humanoids on the Pascagoula River in Mississippi (see this issue's cover story). From their meeting in 2018, Mantle and physiologist Dr Scott encouraged Parker and together they gathered further witness accounts and investigation records. The result is a fat anthology of their evidence, prolifically illustrated with facsimiles, news clippings, photos, interviews, and transcripts of several hypnosis sessions. An unrivalled archive of original, raw data.

The First Female Pharaoh

Andrew Collins

Inner Traditions/Bear & Co, 2023

Pb, £19.99, 464pp, ISBN 9781591434450

The latest in Andy Collins's steady flow of fascinating adventures adds to his list of discoveries. His claim on the cave complex beneath the Giza plateau was a hard act to follow, but here he restores to life Egypt's first female pharaoh – Sobekneferu – accomplished in her time as a religious and political ruler on a par with Cleopatra, Nefertiti and Hatshepsut, yet very nearly lost to history. From the scarce records about this Twelfth Dynasty ruler, the last of her line, Collins claims that her story very probably inspired the modern horror-fantasy trope of the ancient Egyptian priestess who comes to life after her tomb is discovered or violated. As her name implies, she worshipped the crocodile god Sobek and – another Collins discovery – her “suspected” pyramid is aligned on the setting of the bright

star Gamma Draconis (formally called Eltanin) in the Draco constellation. This no stuffy tract, but a cracking read.

Giza: The Tesla Connection

Christopher Dunn

Inner Traditions/Bear & Co, 2024

Pb, £17.99, 368pp, ISBN 9781591434610

Another ‘Egypt’ book, but quite different to the one above, as Dunn – a retired aerospace engineer – continues to explore his theory (set out in two previous books) that the Great Pyramid is “an energy-harvesting machine”. His data derives from extensive acoustic and electromagnetic experimentation on site. He also draws in several related fields – the seismic generation of ‘earthquake lights’ and the atmospheric and electrical experiments of Nicola Tesla – and rebrands this amalgam of ancient theory and practice of pyramid building as a ‘Green’ way to gather and control natural forces. What the ancients did with this ‘clean’ energy is less clear. Dunn suggests it was to “suppress” earthquakes.

Paranormal Cardiff

Mark Rees

Amberley Publishing, 2023

Pb, £15.99, 96pp, ISBN 9781398114753

Ark Rees's book is a well-written and researched historical portrait of the ancient city presented over five distinct themes: its ghosts, hauntings and poltergeists, and its dark folklore and legacy of spiritualism.

The Isle of Wight Entity Case

Ed. Tony Burke.

Flying Disk Press, 2024

Pb, £6, 54pp, ISBN 9798878330428

The omission of the author from the cover is not due (we are pleased to say) to an error by Flying Disk's publisher! The slenderness of this little book (not much more than a pamphlet really) belies its value as a record of one of the strangest entity encounters known to us.

The witness – aged seven at the time, in May 1972 – and her boy companion observe a tall entity – more like an alien clown than a fairy – emerge from under a bridge on the Isle of Wight; then they spend some time in its company and go inside its strange ‘hut’. The girl provided a remarkably detailed account to her father, who communicated it (with a request for anonymity) to the ufologist Leonard Cramp, who sent it on to Norman Oliver, where it languished in his BUFORA archive (now with AFU in Sweden). We are sure this case will be studied with great interest, further supported as it is with facsimiles of drawings, correspondence and (possibly) related material. AFU agreed to Flying Disk publishing the case material... so well done to all concerned for making it happen.

Grey Aliens and Artificial Intelligence

Nigel Kerner

Inner Traditions/Bear & Co, 2022

Pb, £25, 496pp, ISBN 9781591434498

It was predictable that popular anxiety about AI would become the new demonology and this book is sure to fan the flames: its cover proclaims nothing less than an outright “Battle between Natural and Synthetic Beings for the Human Soul”. This whole farrago of nonsense is predicated upon a misinterpretation of the phrase ‘artificial intelligence’ as inorganic entities driven by a ‘racist’ envy of our ‘souls’. They have “hacked” our DNA, says Kerner, and superimposed an “AI construct” so they can control and use us. Apparently, this daft project began 40,000 years ago. Kerner – a man confident of his facts – somehow knows that “there are civilisations in our universe that have developed advanced technologies to become entirely artificial.” It is they who have created the Greys, who “appear to be biomachines”, sent to discover why humans have souls (the existence of which Kerner is equally certain of). Wait a minute! If, way back then, the

Greys and their makers knew about human souls and had the power and the knowledge to engineer this 400-century plan, why wait all that time to take over? And why would they even want to? The mind boggles!

Source Magic: The Origin of Art, Science and Culture

Carl Abrahamsson

Inner Traditions/Bear & Co, 2023

Pb, £17.99, 256pp, ISBN 9781644115015

Abrahamsson is a self-confessed ‘magico-anthropologist’, a writer and film-maker, and the author of several books on modern ‘occulture’ (i.e., “the unseen forces that drive culture forward”). Throughout our cultural history, he says, the complex system of systems we call ‘magic’ has played some part in the development of art, science, religion and philosophy. Most of the book examines this “magical-anthropological” journey and its many developments and effects, both for practitioners and for culture itself. Interesting themes include the way in which children seem to instinctively grasp “the positive effects of magic”; the consequences of magical practice; how the attraction to magic can be corrupted by both religious bodies and occult societies; and how the ‘occulture’ of magic has inspired unique expressions in the arts – especially in music, literature and films. The psychological similarities of technique in the works of Ezra Pound, William Burroughs, Brion Gysin, Derek Jarman and Austin Osman Spare (among many others) are shown to share both ‘magical realism’ and a sense of ‘mortality’ with the related subjects of mythology, witchcraft, shamanism and modern entheogen experiences. Abrahamsson is personal, direct and clear, bringing in many aspects of modern culture. Our favourites were the meditations on Patrick McGooohan's unique TV series *The Prisoner* (1967) and the closing chapter on the mysteries of quantum phenomena which appear to be simultaneously both science and Surrealism.

Stepford sisters and tech bros

Sophie Thatcher excels in a topical and darkly amusing sci-fi horror that's a lot of fun



Companion

Dir Drew Hancock, US 2025
On general release

Companion opens with Sophie Thatcher's Iris reminiscing about her first encounter with Jack Quaid's Josh, wistfully recounting how it was seemingly love at first sight when they awkwardly bumped into one another in the fruit aisle of a supermarket, but the saccharine veneer of their meet-cute is soon shattered as Iris's voiceover continues: "There were two times I felt truly happy. First, the day I met Josh; second, the day I killed him."

Since we have already had the cutesy introduction to the carefree young couple, what lies ahead is, of course, the story of how Iris came to kill Josh, and why this would be a source of happiness for our protagonist.

Heading off for a weekend getaway at a friend's extravagant and conveniently isolated country abode, an insecure Iris is worried about fitting in with Josh's friends, but it soon becomes clear that she has something much more sinister than social awkwardness to worry about.

What ensues is Iris's battle for survival, but this is not your average psychological thriller about a woman in trouble at the hands of a toxic man and his dishonest friends, as *Companion*

There's an engaging sense of unpredictability throughout

is brimming with satirical commentary about the nature of autonomy and ethics in relation to interpersonal relationships in the digital age.

While the marketing material has revealed perhaps a little too much about the true nature of Iris's ordeal, for those who have steered clear of the trailers' partial spoilers, this is a darkly witty caper that approaches the subject of toxic relationship dynamics by taking its premise to horrifying new levels; however, the proceedings never become exploitative thanks to the performances and perspective imbuing this dark comedy with an expertly balanced mix of sincerity and sly self-awareness.

Unfolding in a contemporary setting with a futuristic flair, Sophie Thatcher's look and initial demeanour make obvious nods to *The Stepford Wives*, and her character's journey to emancipation feels both topical and timeless as technology enters the mix to add a modern spin on an otherwise well-known tale.

Thatcher has proven how

good an actress she is, and continues to excel here, delivering a nuanced performance that is at once focused and sympathetic, effortlessly moving through expansive character development without losing any of the inherent vulnerability that makes her character so compelling.

Quaid plays to type as the boy-next-door who becomes increasingly unpleasant on closer inspection, and the other players also work well in their respective roles,

all of whom are introduced as archetypes whose intentions and behaviour are soon subverted once their surfaces receive a few scratches.

The gore is minimal, but impactful, and the plot twists feel earned, varying in nature from surprising to amusing, making it easy to stay invested in a narrative that sustains an engaging sense of unpredictability throughout.

The horror genre has never shied away from providing commentary on problematic aspects of society, and *Companion* is no different; unapologetic without taking itself seriously, the film slyly winks at the audience throughout its runtime, making it a thoroughly entertaining and deeply topical film.

Leyla Mikkelsen



Listen Carefully

Dir Ryan Barton-Grimley, US 2024
Streaming on demand

No need for a lengthy plot regurgitation with this one. Andy (director Ryan Barton-Grimley) is a harassed bank employee whose baby is taken and held for ransom by a kidnapper who communicates with Andy via the child's baby monitor. The basic premise of a criminal directing

remotely the movement and actions of his victim isn't original and with other directorial choices Barton-Grimley diminishes his feature even further. For example, the night-time urban setting and sickly yellow green light recalls Michael Mann's *Collateral*, while the opening sequence in which Andy is pursued by a gang of hooded, masked juveniles is a riff on (or rip-off from) David Cronenberg's *The Brood*.

Listen Carefully (aka *Baby Monitor*) is being promoted as a psychological horror, which is somewhat misleading. It's definitely 'psychological': the film asks you to consider whether what is shown is actually happening or merely a product of Andy's frazzled mind; but there's not a lot of horror, more a sense of tension in a *Tales of the Unexpected* vein.

What one can say for certain however is that the film is a singular vision. Not only does Barton-Grimley direct and star, but he also wrote it, co-produced it, co-edited it, and co-shot it. I'm always wary when one person hogs all the jobs on a film; even Orson Welles, the megalomaniacs' megalomaniac, knew how to delegate. Perhaps the film's problems stem from the fact that the director had no one around to tell him when something wasn't working – such as the ending, which strives for ambiguity but is merely annoying.

There's hardly anyone else in the film and yet the best moments occur when Andy interacts with another character in person. There's a good scene in which he sneaks back into his office and unexpectedly bumps into the janitor who seems to know more than he lets on. Another involves Andy being stopped by a friendly traffic cop... perhaps too friendly.

Not a total flop then – and the budgetary restraints may explain why the film was made the way it was – but even at 82 minutes, this feels very thin.

Daniel King





TELEVISION

FT's resident couch potatoes, **STU NEVILLE & RUTH MORRIS** cast an eye over the small screen's current fortaen offerings



"Gwowing up in East London," Jonathan Ross tells us, "we knew there were places where bad things 'ad 'appened, 'aunted 'ahses and Jack-the-Wippa." Following on from his 2023 solo series *Jonathan Ross: Myths & Legends*, Wossy delves back into the paranormal with *Haunted Homecoming* (Discovery), accompanied by *Help! My House Is Haunted* alumnus and heavily tattooed medium Ian Lawman and writer, researcher and FT contributor Dr Kate Cherrell, whose main function appears to be frightening herself to death in front of mirrors.

Ross returns to his childhood home, the London Borough of Leytonstone; we're told the Ross clan relocated

there in 1961, which Jonathan usefully informs us was 16 years after the war, helpfully reinforced with black and white footage of busy buses, women in headscarves, Wonderloaf delivery-vans and kids playing on bomb-sites. It is to this childhood that Ross wishes to return and the scene is set for a heartwarming journey, as much nostalgia as paranormal investigation, starting at the actual house in which he grew up. Jonathan is

Ross invites her upstairs to look at his Starsky & Hutch poster

accompanied by Kate, who tells us she is mostly there to hold his hand; perhaps misinterpreting this Ross invites her upstairs to look at his *Starsky & Hutch* poster. Nevertheless, the main action was apparently in the cellar, so back downstairs they trudge accompnied by the kind of annoying video and grating sound effects beloved of low-rent fortaen TV shows; this sets the tone for the rest.

Next stop, Epping Forest and a lowlight woodland investigation, thankfully for once without wood-knocks or howling, as this time it's not Bigfoot being pursued but various highwaymen, headless horsemen and (apparently) decapitated bikers. Our intrepid investigators hear odd sounds, smell odd smells, Jonathan goes missing behind a tree, twigs snap, leaves rustle... you know the drill. In episode two, we are invited back indoors into a school which wouldn't look

out of place in an episode of *Scooby-Doo*. After a promising primer by investigator and historian Beth Darlington-Bailey, we are transported back to the era of chalk and slates as the meddling kids assemble around a blackboard, disappointingly not to play hangman. Clearly impressed with their efforts, the old school room rewards their hard work with a self-opening cupboard. This is the most promising phenomenon captured on camera, which generates much excitement across the team with the promise to investigate more closely later on. Despite the enthusiasm, no further mention of the cupboard is made until the concluding scenes, encapsulating the overall problem with the series which, despite obvious good intentions, in the absence of a counter-balancing, scientific viewpoint, just gets carried away with its own enthusiasm.

THE REVEREND'S REVIEW

FT's resident man of the cloth REVEREND PETER LAWS dons his dog collar and faces the flicks that Church forgot!

Any Full Moon can trigger a ravenous lycanthrope – so by that logic, a Supermoon should have half the planet sprouting fur and fangs. Well, that's the delightfully ludicrous premise of *Werewolves* (on demand). Sensible citizens are advised to lock their doors and stock up on silver as the night descends into a *Purge*-style bloodbath. But grizzled hero Frank Grillo has a plan – his team is developing a spray-on 'Moon Screen', a high-tech sunblock for the lycanthropically challenged. It's designed to protect humans from those transformative lunar rays. This, of course, raises all sorts of questions about werewolf physics, but let's not dwell on the science. The film

constantly teeters on the edge of outright parody, playing its concept with just enough sincerity to keep things engaging. Budget constraints rob it of any truly large-scale set pieces – the carnage is more back-alley brawl than apocalyptic rampage – but the gung-ho action, stylised aesthetics and pleasingly practical wolf effects wring every ounce of theatricality out of the production. It lacks the wit and terror of *Dog Soldiers*, but if you're in the mood for a fur-flying rampage with the occasional unintentional laugh, this lands on its paws.

Into the Deep (on demand) doesn't so much weave its three plotlines together as hurl them into a blender and hope for the best. On the one hand, we

High-octane thriller, Shark Week special or Ted Talk?

have a terrifying shark, eager for blood. On the other, there's a gang of maritime criminals straight out of a *Fast & Furious* sequel. Wedged between them are flashbacks of Richard Dreyfuss dispensing life-affirming pep talks about overcoming anxiety, like a kindly, ocean-loving Yoda. The result? Tonal whiplash. Is this a high-octane action thriller, a *Shark Week* special or a TED Talk? (Watch out for Dreyfuss giving his shark conservation lecture over the end credits.) It's technically patchy too: the CGI sharks look impressive in one scene, then the water fills with obviously digital blood; the photography is striking, yet no one noticed the blatant reflection of the filming drone during the title sequence.

But there's something oddly watchable about it; maybe I just have a soft spot for movies that throw everything at the screen to see what floats – even if it doesn't.

Finally, a beautiful 4K restoration of *Captain Kronos: Vampire Hunter* (Hammer Ltd Edition Blu-ray); a reminder that Hammer Films weren't all heaving bosoms and dripping fangs: they occasionally let loose with a swashbuckling, genre-bending delight like this. A rare vampire film that leans into adventure as much as horror, it follows the titular Captain, a roguish ex-soldier with a talent for dispatching the undead. This new release is packed with extras, but the standout is a documentary on writer-director Brian Clemens. Sweet, insightful and brimming with affection for the man behind *The Avengers* (not that one), it's a fitting tribute to a screenwriter who infused genre cinema with wit, energy and English quirk.

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T Sandy Gunn and the mermaid

I once met a man who claimed he saw a huge black panther in Scotland. It had a pheasant in its mouth. He ran to get his shotgun but the creature had vanished. I knew the man and I judged him trustworthy, without guile or motive. Even if I didn't believe him, I would suppose that he was mistaken rather than lying. However, black leopards and jaguars do exist and there is a stuffed puma in an Inverness museum that was captured many years ago in Glen Affric in the Scottish Highlands.

Another story is told on pages 105-107 of *Wade the River, Drift the Loch* by R Macdonald Robertson, (Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh and London, 1948.) A shepherd, Alexander Gunn of Balchreick, Sutherland, described a mermaid he encountered on 5 January 1900, while looking for a lost sheep. She was perched on a rock on the beach, apparently waiting for the tide to come in. She had a human upper body and face but the lower body and tail of a fish! He made this description in his own Gaelic language in front of several witnesses. He ended his testimony: "I saw a real mermaid off Ruadh an Fhir Leithe [about three miles south of Sandwood Bay] and I will not depart from my story for any man on Earth. What I saw was real; I actually encountered a mermaid."

I have hiked into Sandwood on a few occasions and it is exactly the kind of beguiling place one might see a mermaid! Sandy Gunn died in December 1944, always insisting on the truth of his story.

All who knew Sandy vouched for his honesty and integrity.

Tom Bryan
Stewarton, East Ayrshire

The Hexham werewolf

I was delighted to once again view the 'lost' *Nationwide* Hexham Heads footage [FT452:4]. I vividly recall watching it on first transmission back in 1976, aged six. I remember being thrilled

SIMULAGRA CORNER



Ian Batterham sent us this photo of a cave on a mountain in Canberra, resembling the skull of a monkey, commenting: "There is a legend of a bushranger treasure being buried on the mountain – maybe it is in the cave?"

We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your postal address) to Fortean Times, PO Box 1200, Whitstable CT1 9RH or to sieveking@forteanimes.com

that a story about werewolves was on the national news! *Nationwide* was an odd show that could only ever have flourished in the haunted decade of the 1970s. It would have serious news items followed by features on skateboarding ducks, giant snails that drank beer and an old man in his underwear jumping over cartons of eggs.

I have a friend who is four or five years older than me who also watched this episode upon transmission. As an adult he confessed that it terrified him, despite the fact he would have been 10 or 11 at the time. He was convinced that the werewolf was going to come down from Hexham, hundreds of miles to the outskirts of London, just to kill him. But he had an escape plan. He surrounded himself in his bed with teddies (yes, at that age), his logic being that the werewolf would attack them first and he could make his escape while it was ripping their fluff-filled throats out.

Here is where it gets strange. He had one huge teddy that was as big as him. He ended up having sex with it through a split in the seam. He would do this every night and his mum complained about the seam always splitting

and having to stitch it up again not knowing he was making sweet love to the teddy each night.

So there you have it. My mate lost his virginity to a giant teddy on the back of being scared by the Hexham werewolf on *Nationwide*! It doesn't get much more fortan than that.

• In answer to Paul Harris's idea that the Waverley Abbey dragons were actually herons flying about at night [FT453:64], this was my first idea. However, all of the witnesses rejected the idea. I showed them pictures of herons, geese, swans and cormorants and all were rejected. All were adamant that the creatures had ribbed bat-like wings with no feathers. The larger creature seen by Dora had a 10m (33ft) wingspan, bigger than any bird alive today. The two smaller ones both had 3m (8.6ft) wingspans, bigger than any bird in the UK and a size possessed by only a handful of living birds worldwide. When caught in torchlight, the creatures had silvery, featherless skin.

The idea that the tail could have been a heron's legs held together behind it is a neat one, but negated by the fact that the witnesses saw the tail hanging down behind one of the dragons

as it squatted on the ruins of the abbey. If it had been the legs, they would have been underneath the creature, not hanging down the abbey wall.

As for them having no flash cameras, well I'm not part of the group and not their keeper, so I can't tell you why that was, though I can ask.

This is an ongoing investigation and I'll keep FT readers posted as to how it unfolds. I'd certainly like to hear from any other dragon witnesses in the UK and around the world.

Richard Freeman
Centre for Fortean Zoology, Exeter

Comments on FT453

'Legendary Weekend 2024' (pp.24-25) mentions the propensity to throw coins in bodies of water. I have visited the theme parks of Orlando several times, and even in such secular settings every body of water, even those connected to the rides themselves, has its share of scattered coins. As if the parks aren't making enough money already!

• In 'More UFOs over Washington' (p.26), it appears that America refers to UAP as Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena. I would contend that if something is unidentified, it cannot at the same time be identified as an anomaly. As Jenny Randles states in the accompanying article, 'Words Matter' (p.27), it is only unidentified to the witness "in that moment on that day", and might have been more easily identified under different circumstances. It *could* turn out to be an anomaly, but you would need some idea of its nature to decide it was anomalous. I much prefer Unidentified *Arial* Phenomena, as the vast majority of sightings are in the sky.

• The letter from Chris Deighton (p.58) reminded me of something I read many years ago, about a chap who collected found playing cards over a lifetime and ended up with a full deck. There are other folks on the Internet doing the same thing – Google "found playing card". So keep going, Chris. You never know...

Dave Miles
By email

LETTERS

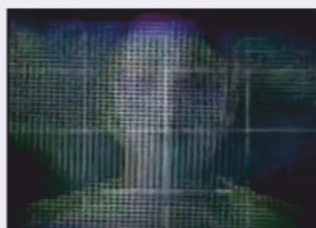
Mystery broadcast

Thank you for printing my account of the unusual 'transmission through time' which I witnessed when I was a kid [FT452:67]. I do agree with your analysis that there is too much approximation, extrapolation and speculation; the event could well have been an imaginative yet quite mundane pirate broadcast that left an impression on my younger self that has been re-edited by 36 years of memory into something more fantastical. I admit that the only exact transcription recalled in the account is the impressive phrase: "This has been the first attempt to broadcast through time". The voiceover did continue after that, but the bizarre sense of time dilation made it difficult to follow. Another strongly recalled detail is the representation of a time as a landscape scrolling past with peaks and valleys, as well as the green text of the data dump window. It is possible that the image was a simple 1980s neon grid with a superimposed face in a *Max Headroom*-style video. The production values must have been quite decent, as I remember comparing it to a trailer I had seen for the upcoming Terry Gilliam extravaganza *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* where Robin Williams's head flies off his body. Anyway, it stayed in the back of my mind for years. I remain unsure as to whether this event was phenomenon or hoax. I would love to see the original broadcast again, and be able to put the matter to rest, but I have had no success finding anything related to it online.

I am also entertained by the idea that future experimental scientists would scour the fortran archives for evidence of their success and discover this account. It's amusing to think they may even be influenced by the details to create it exactly as I've recalled it.

James Finnegan Wakeham
By email

I am writing in response to James Wakeham's story about a mystery broadcast that he witnessed in 1988. I felt compelled to write because I witnessed the

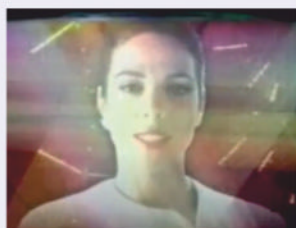


same thing. At the time I would have been around 14 years old. We were then living in Croxley Green, near Watford. I do not have the same level of recall that Mr Wakeham has, but I do distinctly remember some of the details he describes.

It occurred at the weekend, possibly a Sunday, I think in the afternoon. I cannot recall which TV programme or film was being shown at the time, but in my memory now I can see that same burst of static. I was annoyed when it happened. Our TV's channels tended to disappear into white noise whenever thunderstorms were rumbling around, and the set would always have to be tuned again. There was no storm at the time, which is why I was surprised.

I was standing in front of the TV when it happened. I know that my mum, dad and brother were also in the house (we only had a small bungalow) but at the same time I felt like I was utterly alone. There was a sense of complete isolation and silence around me. I couldn't take my eyes off the screen. The static then faded away, and was replaced by a female voice and a face which didn't seem entirely real. I can't quite remember the details of what she said, other than this was the first attempt to send a transmission back in time. That much I absolutely can recall. Those few words have stuck with me.

There were images, moving images, of the Earth. The voice described something about their civilisation. I can remember smiling families seeming to float



through some display of stars and planets. Looking back, these images did have a slightly unreal quality similar to today's CGI, although as is rightly mentioned I would have had no frame of reference with which to make a comparison at the time.

The next day at school I asked one of the other lads in my class if he had seen this 'strange advert' as well. He said he did, but then we didn't discuss it anymore; it was as if we didn't want to talk about it. I don't think I mentioned it to anyone else, in fact. Ever.

I am certain that a letter in an earlier edition of FT described something similar. I wished at the time I'd had the courage to respond. I have finally bitten the bullet. I was delighted to read Mr Wakeham's account, as it somewhat validates my own remembrance of a peculiar event that has stuck with me, although in the form of a fragmented memory, for nearly 40 years.

Mark Brownsell
Letterkenny, Co. Donegal, Ireland.

Regarding James Wakeham's letter about the mysterious broadcast from the future. I remember seeing that same broadcast, but unlike James my memory of it is not as complete. I was only about 10 and we lived in the south of England. I'm not even sure what channel it was on, but I remember this cut in broadcast and thinking it was pretty weird and cool at the time.

No one else was talking about it; I even expected it to make

LEFT: Images from the 1989 First Direct advert identified by Pete Morris – is this what James saw?

the news, but never saw a report about it; and I pretty much forgot about it, until about 10-15 years ago when discussing random things from childhood. I googled it then and remember finding some information about it being a stunt to raise awareness of climate change (global warming) or something like that. I was excited to see James's letter and tried to google the information again, but can't find anything now; it might have been on a blog site where I saw the original information...

Jessica Pankhurst
By email

In his letter "Mystery Broadcast" James Wakeham asks about a mysterious interruption to a TV show being broadcast. This was actually an advertisement for the launch of First Direct telephone and Internet banking system. The broadcast date was 1 October 1989. It started off as an advert for Audi cars. This was an actual advert that had been shown many times previously. Then the apparent interruption cut in, with a woman's head announcing an experimental broadcast from First Direct's 21st anniversary back to their launch. It was accompanied by a series of surreal images. Obviously, it was a pre-recorded advert, made with the co-operation of Audi, and not a real interruption.

James's memory is somewhat faulty: the head wasn't genderless or hairless. The quoted dialogue mostly didn't happen. The CGI was about the same level as could be seen on contemporary *Doctor Who* episodes. As far as I recall, in my broadcast region the picture cut out briefly, although the sound continued. My guess is that someone at the network panicked and tried to cut out the alien broadcast, before realising what was happening.

The advert can be seen on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1vrhUfd7dDo>
Pete Morris
By email



Byronic Spectres

Many thanks for the excellent article by Alan Murdie “Byronic Spectres” [FT450:16-19]. I can add some details to the fate of Lord Byron’s skull goblet and perhaps add some flesh to the bones of the identity of one Newstead ghost, “The White Lady”.

Scandals, both extramarital and incestuous, forced Byron to quit England in 1816. Debt, both inherited and accumulated, forced him to sell Newstead Abbey – skull goblet included – to Colonel Thomas Wildman in 1817. In 1832 Washington Irving – author of “Rip Van Winkle” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” – spent three weeks at the Abbey and wrote about it in his book *Abbotsford and Newstead Abbey* (1835). When he and the colonel were walking in the Newstead woods, they saw a fairy-like form, clad in white, pass before them and disappear – The White Lady. A ghost? Perhaps. It is from Irving that a possible identity of the ghost may be found, the tragic life and gruesome sudden death (essential elements to any haunting!) of Sophia Hyatt. She was killed in 1825.

The connection between Sophia Hyatt and Colonel Wildman began in 1824, the year Byron died of marsh fever. That same year, the colonel’s sister, walking in the gardens, was frightened by a spectral form of a woman in white. Miss Wildman, panic-stricken, turned and fled. Days later, Colonel Wildman received a letter, evidently not from a ghost, but from the living Miss Sophia Hyatt, who wrote to apologise for startling the young lady.

In the letter Sophia explained that she only wanted to wander the grounds because of her devotion to Lord Byron. She explained she had never met the poet in person, but her fascination with his life and works were all consuming.

Colonel Wildman soon visited Sophia at her lodgings at nearby Weir Farm. She received him with severe discomfort; she habitually avoided people as her deafness made verbal communication with others an ordeal for her. They communicated by writing on a slate which she always carried, and he came to know her sad story. An illness at the age of 13 had left Sophia, not only deaf and unable



to follow a conversation, but with poor eyesight and a frail constitution. She was the daughter of a provincial book dealer, but was now quite alone in the world, as her parents were dead. Her only surviving relative, a brother, was captain of a merchant ship. She had come to Newstead shortly after the sale of Byron’s estate, and lived off a small income provided from her father’s estate. The colonel was moved by her situation and assured her that the Abbey grounds were always open to her.

On learning Sophia was destitute, Colonel Wildman and his wife Louise took a keen interest in her welfare. Mrs Wildman invited Sophia to the Abbey and let her use the library there. However, as the months passed Sophia’s health and mental state declined. In a letter to Mrs Wildman, she explained her destitute position and the dreadful isolation her deafness had caused her; and that she was now leaving Newstead for London to pursue a legal claim on her father’s estate. The letters between them are well worth reading and I include them in abstracts in my book *Nottinghamshire Tales of Mystery and Murder* (Countryside Books, 2002).

On the night of Tuesday, 20 September 1825, Mrs Wildman wrote to Sophia, the Colonel would do everything he could for her well-being. The next morning, 21 September, a servant was sent to deliver the letter. However, he returned to the Abbey with the news that Sophia had left for Nottingham to catch the coach to London. The servant was then immediately dispatched to intercept her.

At Nottingham Sophia was waiting for the coach to London, standing in the doorway of the Maypole Inn. A wagon driver

called Potter from Loughborough was driving out of the narrow yard when his horse knocked Sophia down and the cartwheel went over her back, killing her outright. The servant from Newstead arrived too late; he witnessed the scene, a crowd surrounding Sophia’s broken body. An inquest was held – the verdict, ‘Accidental Death’. It was recorded that due to her deafness Sophia had neither heard the approaching cart, nor the warning shouts of those nearby.

Sophia was buried at Colonel Wildman’s expense in the churchyard of Hucknall Torkard, in the same burial ground of her beloved Byron. Although laid to rest near to her idol, Sophia did not find peace. Having once been mistaken for a ghost while yet living, her mournful spirit is said to haunt the grounds of the Abbey to this day. It may spoil the story to ponder how the ghost of someone killed in Nottingham came back to Newstead, and yet, maybe it was Sophia’s devotion to the poet which drew her shade back there.

As for Byron’s Skull Goblet, it remained a treasured relic at Newstead – that is until Ethel Webb took exception to it. Following the death of Colonel Wildman, Newstead was bought by William Frederick Webb in 1861. His sister Ethel appears to be the epitome of a respectable Edwardian lady. A pious Christian, she did not share Byron’s macabre tastes in drinking vessels. On her instruction, the goblet was broken up. Her minister, Cannon Barber, gave the skull a Christian burial at a secret location in the grounds. It is highly likely that Ethel had the silver stem removed beforehand and melted down. Waste not, want not.

So, a unique artefact was lost but not forgotten. In the early 1990s, a group of Byron devotees known as “The Monks” (Members of the Newstead Kindred Society) commissioned a replica of the skull goblet to be made. From a surviving picture of the original, a facsimile was crafted by Joanne Pond, a silversmith of the Longdale craft centre at Ravenshead. Although a replica, the bowl of this new skull goblet is made from a real human skull and lined with silver. Very appropriately, the cost of this new replica was met with funds raised via a series of “ghost evenings” held at the Abbey. In July 1994, with all due ceremony

at the Abbey, the goblet was presented before the Sheriff of Nottingham and is now on display at Newstead, a tribute to a great romantic hero and one of our finest poets. Fortean would enjoy a day out at Newstead.

David Haslam

North Muskham, Nottinghamshire

UAP and tricksters

The six-foot-tall white rabbit seen by a woman in the Navajo nation [FT451:31] reminded me of an old film where the human star was paired with a puca, in the form of a six-foot-tall white rabbit invisible to anyone else. That led to me thinking about Brer Rabbit, an obvious trickster like Bugs Bunny – and recalling that Rabbit is, in America at least, a trickster.

Jenny Randles notes [FT451:29] that most “aliens” are humanoid and goes on to suggest that we have, probably collectively, created them. I recalled reading a book about the early days of the Findhorn foundation where one of the founders asked the fairy patrons of the foundation what their real form was. They answered that they were more like balls of light but adopted the form of the people to whom they were speaking.

An alternative explanation of the humanoid form of the beings met in alien encounters is that they are shapeshifting beings that mimic the form of those who encounter them. Some UAP exhibit the same trickster-like behaviour characteristic of the Fae.

I extracted a cluster of related experiences from early issues of *Fortean Times*, from poltergeists to UAP to the Fae, which led me to think there is no single explanation for UAP, although I regard the theory that aliens are visiting the Earth from other stars as the least likely: given the light speed barrier they would either be vastly more advanced than we are or have extremely long lifespans. Apart from anything else, why would they want to come *here*?

I am becoming more and more convinced that this planet includes at least one tribe of non-human mischievous beings who love to play tricks on humans. Whether these are physical, parapsychical or something else remains to be seen.

Continued on p.66

It Happened to Me...

Readers write in with their own accounts of strange phenomena

Spectral infestation

I am 70 and moved back into our family home in Niagara Falls, New York State, in 2017 as sole owner and occupant, with my dogs and other assorted animals. This house was haunted when my parents bought it in 1964. Over the years the phenomena have waxed and waned, but before I came back into the house, I smudged it but good. Smudging is a Native American ceremony of burning (usually) white sage and walking through an area to cleanse it of negative spirits or feelings or attachments. I've had some scary things happen here including seeing a 'shadow man' with a hat in about 1966. Mostly the ghosts confine themselves to the second floor (what is called the first floor in the UK), which is now rarely used. Anytime anything happens elsewhere in the house I just say, "Go back upstairs or I will smudge you into eternity" and things calm down.

The other night I had to get up in the middle of the night to let the dogs out and as I was returning from the door, the living room light was on. Now the light has a touch on/off switch so I just thought perhaps a cat had run across it and turned it on accidentally. I reached down to turn it off and when my hand was six inches away from the lamp, it turned itself off. I just said, "OK now, *back upstairs!*" (The light has never gone on or off by itself before or since.)

Over the summer I was sitting on my enclosed front porch with the door into the house propped open and I clearly heard a man say, "Ha ha ha" (spoken, not actually laughing). I let that one go. If we're not in the same room at the same time I don't mind it so much. Not long afterwards, a voice called out a loud "Hello" from the kitchen. I thought my neighbour had actually come into the house. The dogs got up and started running toward the kitchen but did not bark. But they did hear it.

Right now, the ghosts are being pretty quiet. When there were three young kids in the house, many more things occurred, and some were scary.



The shadow passed and the dog sat up and began to watch

The ghost introduced itself to me the first time I was in the house when I was eight. My parents were fixing up the house in preparation for moving in, so they fixed a TV upstairs in what was going to become my room for the next eight years. I was upstairs watching TV when over the top of my head, just into the marginal view of my vision, came a boiling mass of... something. Sort of like clouds, but it was moving. Zoom! I was downstairs telling my parents about it. I don't remember what they said, but they must have convinced me I was imagining it, so I returned to watch TV again. And again, while engrossed in the TV show, that boiling mass of ectoplasm-like stuff came over my head and, again, it really scared me. This time I did not go back upstairs that night.

I did see the Shadow Man up there. And the ghost of my beloved dog. My clock radio would turn itself on in the middle of the night sometimes. My brother once saw someone standing looking in the window one night – one storey up from the ground.

We keep peace with each other pretty much. I always ask permission to go up there and I never go up there after dark. I still am leery of it. One dark and stormy day in 2020, I had to go up to retrieve some weaving material and I had a torch with me. I announced I was coming up. As I was looking

through a box of weaving materials, my torch turned into a strobe light. I looked at the barrel to see if there was a button I had previously missed that would make it flash like that (there wasn't). Then it occurred to me what was going on. I said, out loud, "If you will just let me find what I need I will be gone in two seconds." The light stopped flashing on and off, stayed on, I found the material I was looking for and exited the premises.

When I got downstairs, I looked very closely at the light. Nothing was loose, the battery was good, and it has not flashed on and off since.

To return to when we first moved in and the whole family figured out something was going on. To come to our front door, you climbed five steps to the porch, crossed in front of the window and came to the door. We used to see "someone" coming to the door, but no one would ever arrive. It looked just like a shadow since the sunlight was always behind it, but it was obviously a person and it was walking toward the door. First one person saw it, then another. Eventually *everyone* would see it and sometimes we'd all see it simultaneously. Once, people who didn't live here saw it too.

One time my father was sitting in the living room with his dog on his lap. The shadow passed the window and the dog sat up and began to watch "something" come from the (closed) door and through the living room. When it got to a certain point a photo fell off the wall. I went to the door to answer it once (having seen someone coming) and opened the inside door just in time to see the outside door slowly closing. There was nothing else to see.

The shadow visitor continued to be seen until the front porch was enclosed about 25 years ago. After that there were no more sightings... However, one evening in 2023, I was reading in the living room and my Irish Wolfhound was lying against the door when I heard the sound of the knob turning and the front door opening. The dog jumped up and looked at the door. I just jumped. But there was nothing. Just the sound. Over

the years, while I've seen a few things, I've found I'm better at hearing and smelling ghosts. It's interesting that two dogs have reacted to the same door/experience.

In August 2023 I took in a rescue Beagle. She was making her first inspection of the house with one of my other dogs following her closely. As they walked into the kitchen, I heard a little voice – like a child's – say a complete sentence. *What* it said I couldn't tell, but my dog who was following the new dog turned around and looked at me as if to say, "Did you hear that?"

So now let's skip to my sister. She's eight and a half years younger than me and was out of the house when she had her experiences.

We have a semi-finished basement. The workshop is roughed off as a room with horizontal planks that have enough space between the boards that light can be seen through them. My sister was down there once when she realised there was someone in the workshop watching her through the gaps in the boards. Nothing but a shape, but it blocked off the light as it moved to watch. She ran upstairs.

In the late 1980s my daughter, aged seven or eight, was sleeping on the living room couch when she stayed over for the weekend. Later, she told me that she had trouble sleeping because something was "peeking at her" around the corner of the hallway door. The hallway that goes to the second floor.

Two events happened when my sister was washing dishes. In the first, something yanked on the back of her shirt – *hard*. She crumpled to the floor. This was in the time of wall phones, and one was over her head so she called my mother at work, hysterical, and my mother had to come home to calm her. Another time she heard a tiny voice saying, "Help me". She said she even looked under a dish to see if there was something little under there calling for help. No hysteria this time.

One Thanksgiving we were all together for dinner. I had been reading a newspaper in the living

room when I heard my sister sigh a deep, heavy and loud sigh. I lowered the paper to ask what was wrong and found I was alone in the living room. My sister had left. I made one huge leap from the chair into the kitchen where everyone else was. That one, for some reason, scared me. It was so clearly a woman – and close by.

My parents also heard voices here. They awoke one night to hear three voices talking in the living room. (This is a small house. The distance from the bedroom to the living room is only about six feet.) They crept down the hall to peek into the living room and the talking stopped.

In 1968, when I was 16, my grandmother died. One night, for some reason, I didn't want to sleep in my second-floor bedroom and I was sleeping on the living room couch. Suddenly, I heard the raspy, wheezing sound of someone struggling to breathe. I called for my mother and told her I heard my grandmother. I don't know why I thought it was her. My mother said, "You were sleeping, I didn't hear anything, it was nothing", and went back to bed. A few minutes later it started up again. I yelled for my mother again and again my mother came and repeated what she had said before this time adding, "She didn't breathe like that!" And that was that for the night. Years later I told my aunt about this and she looked right at me and said, "But she did breathe like that. We heard her stop breathing from the next room."

My mother was the denier in the house. She knew what was going on but wouldn't talk about it or admit it until much later in her life. She finally confessed that one day as she was putting on her make-up in the bathroom mirror, she saw a towel on a towel rack behind her slowly being picked up by one corner and then slowly let down again.

And more recently (she died in 2017 so it was probably 2015) she said that one night she heard some kind of noise coming from the second floor that scared her. She wouldn't say anything more about it than that, but I may have discovered what she was talking about when I was moving in.

The house was mostly empty with some of my mother's stuff left in it. I had been upstairs packing up her things to be given or thrown away and I was



Elvis was happy and spent his days watching television

exhausted. I was sitting in the living room trying to get up enough strength to go home when from over my head came a huge racket. It sounded like someone having a tantrum and throwing boxes and furniture around. It was very loud, constant, and violent until I got fed up and yelled that I was going to smudge it into eternity if it didn't stop. I was mad. And it stopped. This time I was too tired to feel scared although when I was *less* tired, I got a little more worried about it. I hadn't run into anything like *that* in 60 years.

While I don't know how to explain *any* of these things, I have tried to relay them without embellishment. I treat whatever is here with respect and we have come to some sort of truce, I suppose. It seems to me now there is less activity or fewer entities or whatever than there used to be.

Giselle ScotDeerie

By email

Elvis lived on

The article on Elvis Presley [FT453:28-35] has prompted me to write to you for the first time, after nearly 30 years of reading FT. But in a forteen spirit, I decide to share this story publicly now, for you to take it as you will.

In 1991, I was working in London, as a Licensing Executive in music publishing, organising clearances and rights for the use of music and recordings in television, film and advertising. One particular project was a UK-produced global cinema advert for a well-known brand of denim, which required me to secure the clearance and fee to use a very

cool, rare and unusual old blues track. With some colleagues, I traced the ownership to an old music publisher based in the depths of Louisiana. I got a phone number and set up some calls and emails. And, over the following months, the old publisher and I spoke a lot by phone, as we negotiated the deal with the advertising agency. We also often struck up lively side conversations too, about music, boxing, bootleggers and the rogues and 'hit men' of the 1950s US record industry. He had some great stories and had seen all the legends of country, folk, blues, jazz and rock'n'roll. Anyway, the TV advert was done, and a few months later he received a fairly hefty six figure royalty fee from us, which was likely a big deal for a small publisher like him. He offered to give me a 'cut of the deal', but I explained that was not allowed as I worked for the publishing company and did not receive commissions. A few weeks later, he sent to me by post a thank-you card and a strange alligator skinned wallet (which I still have) – and he said he wanted to speak to me early one morning, on a particular day, at a very particular time.

I remember being the only person in the huge publishing office when the phone rang, exactly on time, at about 8am, on a bright, sunny summer morning. He thanked me again, and said that he would miss our rambling chats. We talked as normal and then he spoke in a lower tone, and in a more private and personal way. He told me that he was an old man who had seen a lot, but he was not dumb nor stupid, nor joking with me with what he was about to tell me. He had decided after our work together, that he wanted to share something privately with me, in this, our final conversation.

The old music publisher then calmly told me that he regularly saw Elvis Presley, whom he said was still very much alive – in 1991. He said that Elvis did indeed fake his death with the help of his doctor and undertaker, and some local underworld figures. Elvis had been living in the depths of the Tennessee bayou since 1977 with his extended family. He told me Presley never left the area itself, which was a series of compounds and houses, surrounded by rivers and inside miles of private land and back tracks and so very inaccessible. The old publisher even told me

he had been with Elvis, just a few weeks ago, with Presley still being only about 56 years old. He told me Elvis was quiet, happy, and that he spent his days watching television, singing spirituals, reading the Bible and with no interest in rock music or fame. The old publisher confided he had known the Presley family well since the 1950s and they were incredibly protective and tight. He explained he was only re-introduced to Elvis again (he had known him and his band well in the 1960s and 1970s) – in confidence, in the late 1980s and it was a shock to him. It was he said a 'family' thing. When I questioned him, he told me he realised it seemed a crazy story, but that he was only telling me the truth and that in the end it would all be known, but it was a complex story of money and legal things. The conversation rather uncomfortably moved on, and there was no punch line or laughter or reveal. He said thanks one last time, wished me all the best in my career, and I never spoke to him again. And this is now my story, that I very rarely tell people, for obvious reasons.

As I write this now, I realise how absurd this sounds and maybe I should just keep this to myself. Was his story true? I don't know. What I do know is that this was a genuine smart old music publisher from the depths of the Louisiana music scene, and that he was genuinely linked to rare music connections, labels and catalogues through the South – which is why I was talking to him about music deals in the first place. This was not a random journalist or a conspiracy nut or flaky pulp writer.

And when I think back to that summer day in 1991, I felt a truth in his voice when he told me. He had no reason to fool me or mock me after the help I had given him and the relationship we had. Perhaps it was just his private joke on the young English publishing dude from London? But, if so, a rather convoluted joke, for little gain, for a professional man. Or maybe, just maybe, he wanted to give back to me something valuable when he could not give me anything financially. He offered me something that only a very few people know, because they are in the know and have the conversation that I had. Some of us do know that Elvis Presley did not die in 1977.

AA (full name withheld)

Branksome, Dorset

LETTERS

Continued from p.63

• Changing topic, the tale of the dancing Walking Stick [FT449:64] reminded me of the 17th century tales of Major Thomas Weir's staff that was said to have walked on its own in front of him and even carried out errands for him [FT311:30-36]. These are the only tales I have heard of animated sticks.

Alex Kashko

Edinburgh, Scotland

Tió de Nadal

I want to reach out regarding the piece titled "Weird Christmas" in FT452:23, specifically the section on the *Tió de Nadal* (this, or simply "Tió", is the real name; "Caga Tió" refers to the accompanying song) tradition in Catalonia. As a Catalan who has celebrated this unique custom since childhood, I was thrilled to see it featured in your magazine, to which I am a subscriber, and have been a fan of for years.

However, I noticed a few inaccuracies in the description of the tradition, and I thought you might appreciate some additional context. The *Tió* has its roots in ancient pagan rituals tied to the Winter Solstice. The act of striking the log with a stick originally symbolised "waking up" nature during the darkest days of the year. Offerings of sweets and other foods were made to the log (*Tió*) as a way to honour and nourish nature. Interestingly, while children ate these offerings, adults believed they were feeding on the 'souls' or spiritual essence of the food.

When Christianity spread, these pagan elements were adapted and transformed into the tradition we see today. While the modern version retains some of its earlier charm, much of its deeper meaning has been lost or altered.

The *Tió* ceremony typically takes place on the evening of 24 December, not on Christmas Day, although some families do it on the morning of the 25th. Usually, it's done before the Christmas dinner with the family. The gifts the *Tió* shifts tend to be small items (socks, candies, small toys) because the larger presents are brought by Santa Claus the next

day or by the Three Wise Men (*Reis Mags*) on 6 January, as was correctly mentioned. It's also worth noting that children don't usually pray while waiting for the *Tió* to shit (perhaps in very religious families, but it's not common). Instead, they're asked to leave the room and count to 10, or an adult distracts them while others hide the gifts under the blanket.

One more detail: the *Tió* is 'fed' throughout December by placing small plates of food (most often tangerines!) in front of it. It's the adults' job to secretly eat this food to maintain the illusion, which can sometimes be tricky since children are constantly checking to see if the *Tió* has eaten or not!

Marc Gras

Barcelona, Spain

Memory and belief

Regarding SD's letter about the 'memory cloud' [FT446:60], this idea of the mind being independent of the body as a 'memory cloud' has been put forward before. Perhaps this explains as access points to the cloud of unknowing, Mark Campbell's experience 'round the longstone' [p.62] as haunted locations or hotspots of paranormal activity? Also maybe poltergeists are roving hotspots, created by threshold activity (puberty) and geological seismic or volcanic activity is the same kind of border reality changer.

Couple this with Julia Morgan Scott's letter 'Helpful synchronicity' [p.59] and you have Google or a search engine at play and maybe one that works like 'magic' when it comes to 3-D retrieval of lost items or wish fulfilment possibly too?

As for accessing this, perhaps Vincent Szorpa's incident ["The White Balloon", p.63], where strong emotion is involved, helps? Myre's subliminal consciousness, mentioned in the review of books about William James (*Mind Dust and White Crows*, p.51), pointed out his belief that such states could be accessed through telepathy, clairvoyance, hypnosis, trance and psychedelic drugs, although the last point is one I've added. In other words anything that shakes you out of your mindset and into a new one, breaking free of preju-

dice and certainty.

With regards to Middle-aged Mulder as I've said before, it's about experience versus belief or openness (guard down) as opposed to defences up against the new, the strange, the different (prejudice as it is known in various circles; this includes all phenomena, not just the paranormal). Theory isn't fact, it's a belief. What is experienced, is fact.

What we have to face, characteristically, is that there are two kinds of mind – one is steady, calm, controlled and reasoned: technology plus science – whereas the other is temperamental and reactive: artistic. In Zen they would be considered the diamond and butterfly (magpie) minds.

Rob Amos's point [FT447:64-65] wasn't imagination but memory overlay, plus the belief that the incident was real and had therefore to be a 3-D object, not a flat, cut-out of a puma. The Brumby woods incident, mentioned in a previous issue, had a witness who made the same point. She said that her description differed from her friends' in the car (a black, scowled figure became 'grey' in her mind because that is what she was expecting) when she suddenly realised that this was her preconception and not what she actually witnessed. A very insightful revelation.

The film *The Father*, starring Antony Hopkins, makes clear that when we start to lose our faculties, our perceptions are just as muddled as in childhood and our memories can make no sense of the world, except without a load of blunders. It is the middle section of our lives, where we gain our best sense of what reality is because we gain control of both our memory and our awareness of the world we find ourselves in as a peak/peek experience (limited, rather than overrun and overwhelmed by sensory input).

What I can say about facial recognition is that it is remembering 'where' you know someone from

(person and place). Names, being subjective rather than objective, I liken this kind of memory to a boat and as you get older, it is still moored to the shore but it takes longer to pull it in as it has drifted further away from the beach. Also mixing up words is like a fruit machine, where association might bring up an inappropriate name for something, that you might know is wrong, if conscious of your mistake.

Without feedback, we cannot make sense of the world and learn from our own actions and the mistakes of others. In other words, in a world of action alone, nothing changes, but in a world of thought it can.

Tony Sandy

By email

Looking for Lucan

Fascinating article by Phil Baker on the vanishing of Lord Lucan [FT451:38-43]. It's a shame, presumably due to timings, the piece doesn't refer to the three-part documentary series, *Lucan*, which aired on the BBC in November. The short series followed Neil Berriman, son of the Lucan household's murdered nanny, Sandra Rivett, on his obsessive, life-consuming search to find the man he remains convinced murdered his mother. Berriman believes Lucan is still alive and that he has found him – living in a remote part of Australia; a name-changing, mercurial narcissist. It's an uneasy watch, fittingly inconclusive, although it does add layers of odd coincidences that only make the case richer.

Sean Agass

By email



"Well these grids will have to go for a start..."



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PECULIAR POSTCARDS

JAN BONDESON shares another deltiological discovery from his prodigious collection of postcards. This month's pictorial blast from the past celebrates another eccentric Bird-Man, the mysterious R Hedges Bates of Hyde Park



51. THE BIRD-MAN OF HYDE PARK

The mystery man Richard Hedges Bates, bane of the Internet genealogists, was born in Winslow, Buckinghamshire, in 1865. Little is known about his early activities, but by the 1890s, he began to self-publish small religious tracts, usually 16 pages long, about weighty subjects such as 'The ruling and Kingdom of Christ, in opposition to the rule of Satan and death' or 'Self-cultivation: its importance and benefit. What is religion?' He later had a slender volume printed, containing all his tracts up to date, and entitled *Religious Tracts by R Hedges Bates*. Published, under the initials RHB at Stewkley, or at Torbay Villa, near Leighton, Beds.

Apart from his religious writings, R Hedges Bates also had a second career. In the 1890s, he became 'The Bird-Man of Hyde Park', a well-known London eccentric who spent all day in Hyde Park feeding the sparrows and pigeons. Every morning, this bearded, scruffy-looking fellow left his lodgings in Anger Road, St Pancras, and travelled to Hyde Park, wearing a raincoat and a large bowler hat to protect his clothes from the droppings emanating from the flock of birds surrounding him. He sold picture postcards of himself feeding the birds, with 'Birdies' Message', a heartfelt doggerel poem of his own composition, condemning the sin of ornithophagia, on the reverse:

Some mortals think they know a lot.

We birds know very much more,

Cooked by a fire, or boiled in a pot,

Sweet morsels to fill your jaw.

When we sing, you enjoy our song,

And love us – Oh! so much;



"THE BIRDMAN"
HYDE PARK CORNER

You chase and shoot us all day long,

Striving our bodies to clutch!

In November 1920, when R Hedges Bates had been feeding the birds in Hyde Park for nearly 25 years, a reporter from the *Daily Mail* came to call. For many years, he had seen the untidy-looking, bearded old man standing on the Hyde Park lawn, feeding the plump London sparrows. When the Bird-Man whistled, the birds rose in twos and threes from the grass, fluttering, hovering and resting on his hand, from which they took crumbs. The dotty Bird-Man was quoted saying: "They love a little tune, and

"When the band plays you can almost see them dancing to the music"

when the band plays you can see them almost dancing to the music!" He did not do any work, he said, instead supporting himself by the sale of his picture postcards depicting him feeding his feathered friends, with his poem on the back:

LEFT: An unposted card featuring Richard Hedges Bates.

*Why can't you join with us and sing,
To the Lord of Life, your praise,
Your knowledge is so surprising,*

Be just – and mend your ways.

By 1926, sparrow-taming in Hyde Park had caught on, and there were now two Bird-Men on the premises. A man named Algernon Valentine had trained his flock of birds to line up on a railing, and come forward one by one to take crumbs from his hand when he made a gesture. The original Bird-Man, described as an old fellow with a patriarchal beard, eschewed such flashy showmanship, but he sold his postcards to all and sundry, and gave delighted little girls crumbs of bread with which to feed the sparrows from their hands. He himself had a trick to persuade his favourite sparrow to come and take a breadcrumb from his mouth: it was the only bird in the country, he told a journalist, that possessed an intellect sufficiently capacious to master this difficult feat. Algernon Valentine is recorded to have expired in early 1927, at the age of 63, and the original Bird-Man no longer had a rival for the affection of the park's feathered population.

In September 1928, disaster struck for the Bird-Man: some ornithophobic visitor to Hyde Park disapproved of him causing a nuisance with his flock of sparrows, and reported him to the police for selling postcards in the park without a licence. In vain did the Bird-Man object, in front of the magistrate Mr Mead at the Marlborough Street police court, that he had merely offered people bread to give



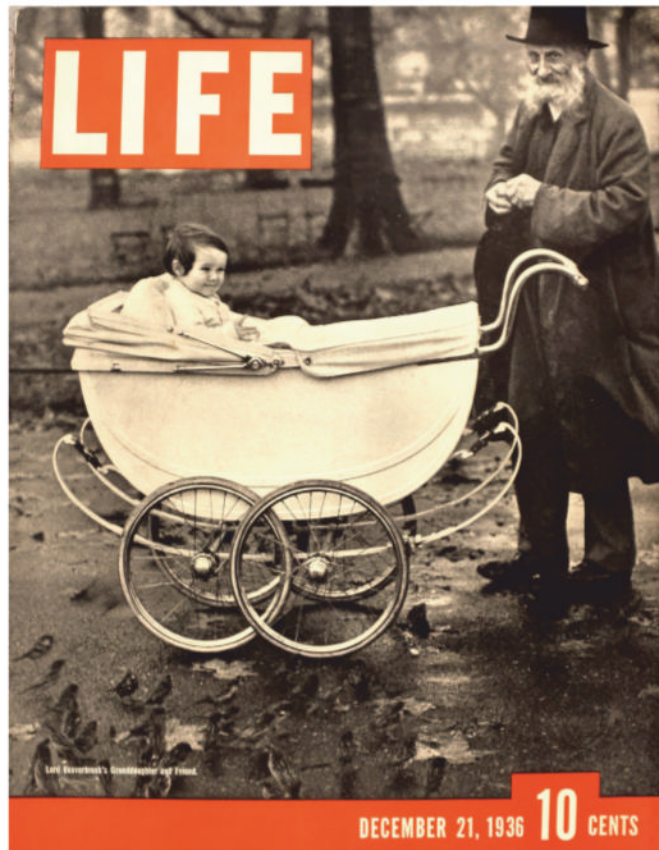
ABOVE: Two more postcard images of the Bird-Man. BELOW: The Bird-Man appeared on the cover of the US magazine *Life* in 1936. The photograph bears the caption: "Lord Beaverbrook's granddaughter and friend".

to the sparrows, and they could give what they wanted for his postcards. The stern Mr Mead said that if he was not selling he was begging, and fined the Bird-Man seven shillings and sixpence. The broken old man left the court, perhaps pondering the disdain for money shown by his libertarian feathered friends, and reciting:

*We pay no taxes, rates or rent,
Our acting to all is free;
On kindly deeds our minds are bent,*

Our banner is LIBERTY.

This hard blow from the Marlborough Street magistrate meant that the Bird-Man was no longer able to sell his postcards in Hyde Park, to keep poverty from the door and cater for his frugal needs. He is said to have died soon after, although this cannot be confirmed via the Internet genealogy homepages. The only library copy of his *Religious Tracts*, at the British Library, was destroyed through enemy action during the Second World War, but before the malevolent spectres of these conflagrative Teutonic aviators begin a post-mortem exultation that they managed to lay waste the Bird-Man's theological life



work, they should be sternly reminded that loose copies of many of his privately printed tracts are kept in the National

Library of Scotland, and in the Oxford and Cambridge university libraries. We know from *Ghosts of London*, by JA

Brooks, that Hyde Park was home to a haunted elm known as Black Sally's tree, since a victim of Dutch Elm Disease; the ghost of the young Duke of Hamilton, killed by Lord Mohun in a duel, has also been rumoured to haunt the premises. Was there perhaps also the ghost of a shabby-looking old man, surrounded by a cloud of fluttering sparrows, preaching fire and brimstone to the covetous ornithophobes:

On deceiving your minds are bent,

*And you know – Oh! such a lot
But when we all come to judgment*

In Hell you may get it hot.

Blessed are the meek, the Holy Scripture tells us, for they will inherit the earth. As for the fate of the humble old Bird-Man himself when facing the final judgment, surely he must have been destined for Heaven, given his exemplary life of poverty, religious devotion and heartfelt ornithophilia; particularly if he bent down before Peter's wicket and recited:

*You tell of a happy kingdom
Far above the bright blue sky;
And you in your greater wisdom,
May teach us to fly so high.*

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FORTEAN TIMES is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing that some scientists tended to argue according to their personal beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity

in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times.

Fortean Times keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

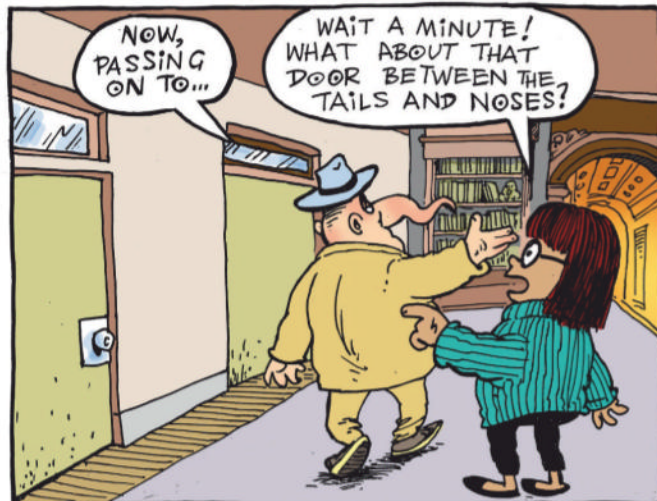
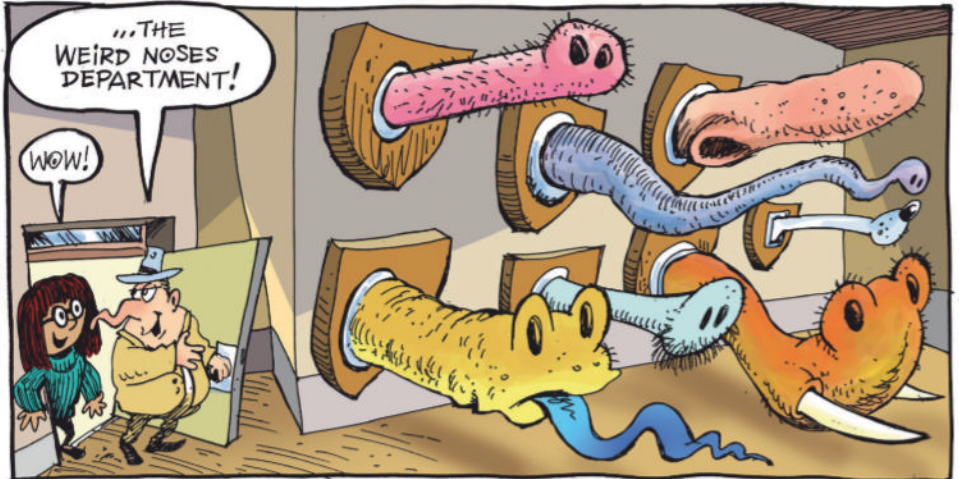
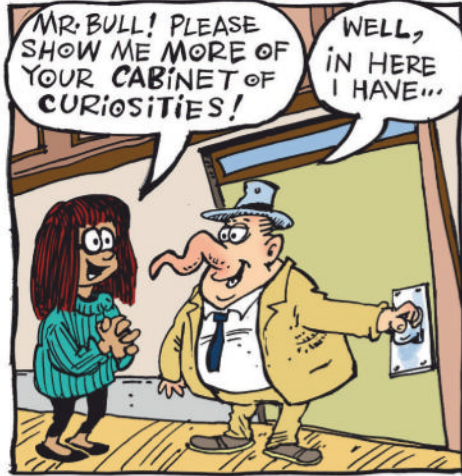
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STRANGE DEATHS

UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL

Five people fell ill and three of them died after eating Christmas cake at a family gathering in Torres, Brazil. Some of the family members complained that the cake had a "peppery" taste, then began to suffer vomiting and diarrhoea, resulting in them seeking medical help at the Nossa Senhora dos Navegantes Hospital. Shortly after admission, sisters Maida Berenice Flores da Silva, 58, and Tatiana Denize Silva dos Santos, 43, died from cardiac arrest, while 65-year-old Neuza Denize Silva dos Anjos died later from "shock after food poisoning". Blood tests revealed the presence of arsenic in the bodies of everyone who had eaten the cake, with the unnamed woman who made it having the highest concentration. She was the only member of the group to have had two slices, but survived the poisoning. Police were not clear at the time of the reports whether the poisoning had been intentional or accidental, but when they searched the house they found several date-expired food items that they sent off with the cake for testing. Police also requested the exhumation of the cake maker's late husband's body for tests; he died of what was believed to be food poisoning in September, but his death was deemed natural at the time. *BBC News*, 28 Dec 2024.

A 32-year-old construction labourer, identified only by his first name, Shabarish, was wandering drunk in Bengaluru, India, when he ran into six of his friends who were setting off fireworks to celebrate Diwali. They invited him to join in, and challenged him to sit on the box of fireworks while they set it off, promising to buy him an auto rickshaw if he completed the dare. Shabarish duly sat on the box while his equally drunk friends ignited the lot. The whole box went up, with the incident being captured on a video that later went viral on social media. It shows Shabarish being enveloped in sparks and flame, then collapsing to the ground. According to Shabarish's mother, "Dinakar [one of the group of friends] came and told me Shabarish had set off fireworks and sustained injuries," adding that, "As my son was drunk, I believed his version. I rushed to the spot with my younger daughter and with the help of those youths, we rushed [him] to a nearby hospital." Shabarish had sustained severe burn injuries to his

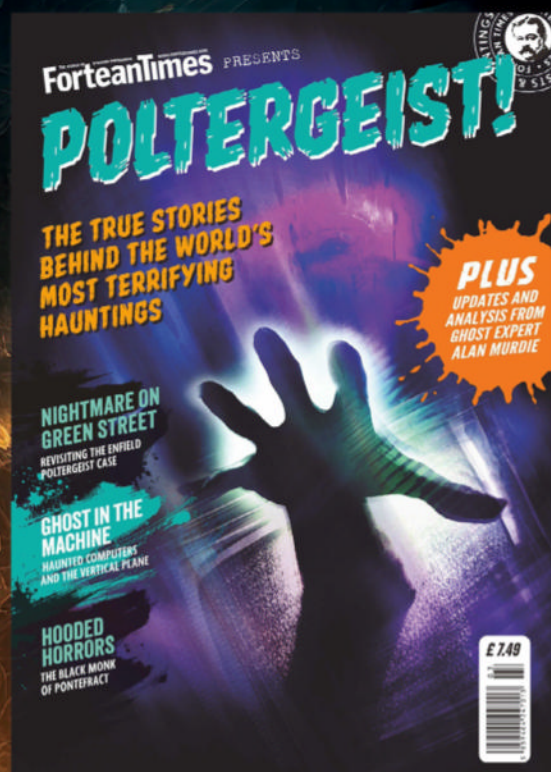
buttocks, abdomen, and thighs and his burns were deemed too severe to treat locally so, his mother says, "Around 1am, he was moved to the burns ward at Victoria Hospital, where he died." CCTV revealed that Shabarish had not set off the fireworks as had been claimed, resulting in the arrest of his friends for culpable homicide. *independent.co.uk*, 5 Nov 2024.

After an 83-year-old man in Bremen, Germany, died of organ failure and septic shock at the city's Red Cross Hospital, doctors did a blood test to determine what had caused the infection. They discovered he had died from *Capnocytophaga canimorsus*, a bacterium that is common in pets but rarely infects humans, which, the medics concluded, he had acquired through being licked by his dog. They advised that "pet owners with severe flu-like symptoms should urgently seek medical advice." Meanwhile, in Spain, a 38-year-old woman from Colombia collapsed from anaphylactic shock on the way to a health centre in Viallreal after being severely bitten by the family's pet hamster. Arriving at the centre, she suffered cardiac arrest and could not be saved. Hamster saliva contains proteins that can trigger allergic reactions, particularly after serious bites, and family members believe the woman's asthma and anxiety could have made her response to the allergen more severe. *Mail on Sunday*, 22 Sept; *D.M.*, 15 Oct; *colombiaone.com*, 17 Oct 2024.

On 11 November 2024, a woman customer at an Indianapolis branch of the gym chain Planet Fitness complained to staff about a foul stench coming from the tanning room. On investigation, staff found the remains of Derek Sink, 39, in one of the tanning beds. Gym records and data from the ankle tag Sink was wearing showed that he had entered the gym on 8 November and had never left. A needle was found close to the tanning bed where Sink was discovered and his family reported that he had been struggling with drug addiction; it is believed that the ankle tag he was wearing related to a recent drug-related conviction. It seems probable that Sink took an inadvertent drug overdose before entering the tanning bed on 8 November and died while using it, remaining undiscovered until the 11th. *huffpost.co.uk*, 13 Nov 2024.



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